

Christian Doctrine

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Preface

The purpose of this book is to present the doctrine of Christianity as God has revealed it to me. Of course, many books have been written on the same topic, but what I believe sets this book apart from most others is that my understanding of Christian doctrine is largely influenced by the context of Near Eastern cultureⁱⁱ. The educational journey that God has led me upon over many years has included extensive study of that culture so that I can discern how it helps to explain the content of the Bible.

What is Doctrine?

The best starting point for this discussion of Christian doctrine is to first define the word “doctrine.” Doctrine simply refers to the principles of a given religion, which in this case is Christianity. Of course, the Bible is the primary text of Christianity, but the Bible does not present the substance of Christianity in a systematic, topical way. Rather, the Bible is a collection of commands, poetry, parables, letters, and narratives that do contain the substance of Christianity, but the description of any one aspect of the religion is spread out over the entire Bible. For instance, if you wanted to learn about the Christian perspective of forgiveness, that perspective is in the Bible, but there is no concise section or chapter that specifically describes the totality of forgiveness from the Christian perspective.

Any book on the topic of Christian doctrine is an attempt to describe the aspects of Christian faith in a systematic, topical presentation. This book is most certainly not a replacement for reading the Bible but is rather a tool to help the reader in his study of the Bible. While the Bible does not present Christianity systematically, the doctrine of Christianity is assuredly systematic – it follows set patterns – and it is my hope that this book will help the reader to recognize in the Bible the various patterns and principles of Christian faith.

What is the Near East?

The “Near East” refers to a region of Western Asia and North Africa that includes modern-day countries such as Israel, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon, but that list is by no means comprehensive. The term is loosely based upon the idea that the “East,” as a word, refers to Asia,

and those countries just listed represent the portion of Asia *nearest* to the “Western world,” which includes Europe and North America, hence, the term “Near East.” The “Far East” would refer to countries farthest from the Western world, such as China and Japan. The “Middle East,” which includes countries such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia, is also sometimes considered to be part of the Near East, at least from a cultural point of view. Furthermore, parts of North Africa, such as Egypt, are also culturally part of the Near East. Indeed, these terms are meant to convey a grouping of people that share cultural characteristics in addition to geographical characteristics. With the exception of the country of Israel, we could also call this culture by the appellation “Arab,” but I generally refrain from using that label because in modern times, it carries strong political connotations that are irrelevant to the study of Christianity.

Why Study Near Eastern Culture?

The writers of and characters in the Bible were almost all natives of Near Eastern lands and culture. Certainly, the Patriarchs, the Israelites of the Exodus, and Jesus and His disciples were all from the Near East. Even the Apostle Paul, though he spent most of his Christian career preaching in the Greco-Roman lands, was originally from what is today Turkey, another member of Near Eastern culture, and he studied in Israel as a rabbi.

Near Eastern culture not only has unique customs and idioms but also unique psychology, philosophy, and rhetoric, all of which are reflected in the Bible. Indeed, the intended meaning of many Biblical passages cannot be discerned without a proper understanding of this Near Eastern cultural context in which they were formulated.

Of course, the events of the Bible, and the recording of those events on paper, occurred thousands of years ago, so how can relatively modern descriptions of Near Eastern culture be relevant to the study of the Bible? Well, praise God for the fact that one of the hallmark features of Near Eastern culture is an emphasis upon, indeed a prioritization of, tradition. In that culture, changes to speech patterns, philosophy, psychology, and even many of the activities of daily life come only at a glacial pace, and that which was done by one’s ancestors is considered to be valuable and right **because** it was practiced by one’s ancestors. As a result, relatively contemporary Near Eastern culture, particularly that found in the rural areas, is very similar, if not identical, to the culture expressed in the Bible.ⁱⁱⁱ

In summary, the study of Near Eastern culture is relevant to the interpretation of the Bible precisely because the Bible is a very Near Eastern work of non-fiction literature.

What About Islam?

Some people may object that study of Near Eastern culture is irrelevant to Christian doctrine because of the prevalence of Islam in that region. Admittedly, the majority of the people in the Near East are Muslims, but there is a sizeable minority of Christians in that region as well. More to the point, though, it is important to remember that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was not even born until 570 AD.^{iv}, so Islam is a relatively new system of belief. Christianity predates it by approximately 540 years, and Judaism, upon which Christianity is built, predates it by thousands of years.

Thus, Near Eastern culture existed long before Islam arrived. Given the prioritization of tradition in that culture, the impact of Islam upon the aspects of that culture are minimal, and I would say the same thing about Christianity and Judaism. The religions of the Near East largely reflect and express the preexisting culture of that area rather than the culture reflecting and expressing the religions.

Where is all the Scripture?

One thing you will immediately notice about this book is that the direct quotations from Scripture are probably fewer than you would expect from a book such as this, and that is a purposeful choice. Much of the problem of modern Christianity is that people select individual verses or passages from the Bible and attempt to discern doctrinal meaning from those narrow selections alone. Such an approach will inevitably lead to misinterpretations because of the rhetorical style of the Near East. Near Eastern writers and speakers formulate their words in order to convey a specific point or concept to a specific audience *without any consideration for how those words could be misinterpreted or contradict a different point or concept*. They have that freedom of expression because in Near Eastern culture, the onus is upon the listener to understand the speaker's *intended* meaning, not upon the speaker to ensure the listener's correct understanding. If the listener misunderstands, it is considered his fault, not the speaker's fault. As Abraham Rihbany, the esteemed scholar upon Near Eastern culture, wrote:

“A Syrian’s [‘Syrian’ is a term used here to refer to people of the Near Eastern culture] chief purpose in a conversation is to convey an impression by whatever suitable means, and not to deliver his message in scientifically accurate terms. He expects to be judged not by what he says, but by what he means. He does not

expect his hearer to listen to him with the quizzical courtesy of a “cool-headed Yankee,” and to interrupt the flow of conversation by saying, with the least possible show of emotion, “Do I understand you to say,” etc. No; he piles up his metaphors and superlatives, reinforced by a theatrical display of gestures and facial expressions, in order to make the hearer *feel* his meaning.”^v

In short, the Bible was meant to be studied and considered as a whole. It was authored by Near Easterners who, in many cases, expected an audience that would have an intimate familiarity with Near Eastern culture and rhetoric. Thus, every piece of Scripture can only be accurately interpreted by analyzing it within the context of the entirety of the Bible and Near Eastern culture and rhetoric.

Chapter 1: Why Believe in God?

Christianity presupposes the existence of God, so before describing the principles of Christian doctrine, we must make an argument for the existence of God. Some Christians would say that they believe God exists because the Bible portrays God as being real, but such an argument is disingenuous because Christians believe that the Bible's authority is founded upon it being the word of God. We are not convincing when we justify our belief in the existence of God solely upon what we believe to be God's own assertion of such existence.

If we are to have a persuasive argument for the existence of God, it has to come from human experience, for whether it is wise to do so or not, we instinctively trust our sensory perceptions, above all else, to define reality and truth.

What is a God?

To make an argument for the existence of God, we must first define what a god is. How do we define the nature of a god? A god is more powerful than human beings, but power alone cannot define a god. A tornado is more powerful than a human being, but we would not call it a god. A god is wiser and more knowledgeable than human beings, but knowledge and wisdom alone are not gods. The Internet arguably contains all the knowledge and wisdom ever discovered by humanity – a quantity of knowledge and wisdom that surpasses the intellect of any one human being – yet we would not call the Internet a god.

God is Spirit

Jesus said in John 4:24, "*God is spirit.*"^{vi} We often think of a "spirit" as a ghost, like a cartoon ghost, but the word "spirit" really just means "perspective."^{vii,viii} A spirit is a way of understanding the circumstances of life and behaving in accordance with that understanding. For instance, if someone insults you, and you become angry, we could say that you have a spirit of anger. In that spirit, you will have a negative perspective on many aspects of your life, and you will behave in a manner consistent with that perspective.

A spirit is a perspective that its possessor seeks to manifest in sensory existence. Thus, spirit is the

motivation of behavior. God is spirit in that He is a conscious being with a particular perspective, and He uses His infinite knowledge, wisdom, and power to manifest and fulfill His perspective in sensory existence. This is what is meant by the “Holy Spirit.” It is simply the unchanging perspective of God. It is the unchanging understanding that God has of all things that He puts into sensory manifestation in the world.

If, as Jesus said, “God is spirit,” and spirit is the perspective that one works to put into sensory existence, then we should be able to discern the existence and nature of God from our recognition of the effective manifestation of God’s Spirit in this world. The proof of the existence of a god, then, is to be found in human experience. Does the combined experience of all humanity, throughout time, indicate the existence of a supernatural power being used to manifest some particular perspective? At this point, we are not concerned with what God’s perspective on things is but only with the empirical justification for the following hypothesis: the sum total of human experience is greater than the sum total of human knowledge and human power used to manifest human perspectives. If that hypothesis is justifiable, then it would indicate the existence of a god.

Life is Random?

Now, let us examine human experience in order to hopefully prove that aforementioned hypothesis.

Atheists like to argue that life is simply the product of random interactions of atoms and that Earth is simply one of the few places, or the only place, where such random interactions resulted in intelligent life on par with humanity. However, in just the Milky Way galaxy, which contains Earth, there are an estimated 300 million planets that are potentially habitable,^{ix} yet we have no conclusive proof of life on any of them, except Earth. This means that life, particularly intelligent life on par with humanity, must be incredibly rare in the universe, if not entirely unique to Earth.

By the theory of random creation, life must only be the result of an incalculable number of interactions of atoms occurring in very specific ways. However, if life is so rare – if it requires so many random interactions to happen in specific ways – then it must be incredibly fragile too.^{x,xi} If even one of those required interactions goes wrong in any way, then life cannot exist. Indeed, our own human experience bears out just how fragile life is, for we know that there are countless ways in which a man can die. Looking at numbers, in 2021, there were approximately 7.91 billion people on Earth, approximately 69.25 million died, and approximately 133.97 million were born.^{xii} This means that less than 1% of the human population died in 2021. If life is so fragile, how is it that over 99% of us are surviving from one year to the next?

The evidence shows that while human life is incredibly rare and fragile, it nevertheless not only exists on Earth but thrives here as well. Those are two contradictory pieces of evidence, so how can we reconcile them? The atheists would stand firm on their claim of random creation. For them, thriving human life is extremely unlikely but is nevertheless still possible, and that possibility has been realized on Earth.

Moving from a macro level to a micro level, consider your own life. How many mistakes can you recall making when faced with major decisions in your life? How many potentially harmful, if not deadly, mistakes have you made in your life out of sheer momentary stupidity or foolhardiness? Most people can recall several, and of those major mistakes, we typically realize just how close we came to disaster, and yet disaster did not occur. Through some unexpected and unlikely combination of interventions and circumstances, you were spared the full negative effects of your mistake. Atheists would consider these events to be the product of random chance – of luck.

Atheists would contend that none of what I have described is *proof* of the existence of a god, but their standard of proof is a hypothesis that cannot be disputed. With such a standard, though, nothing can be proven because everything can be disputed. Thus, as with most things in life, we are left to believe that which we discern to most likely be true given the evidence. This is the nature of empirical proof: the collection and interpretation of observational data in order to form a conclusion that explains all of the data. Admittedly, the observational data of human experience can be explained by either the hypothesis that a god exists or the hypothesis that life is entirely a random creation. However, I would argue that the random creation hypothesis is inherently dubious, for it relegates the existence of a planet thriving with human life, both at the individual and species level, to be an extremely remote possibility. If the hypothesis itself deems the empirical evidence at hand to be extremely unlikely to exist in the first place, why should we be inclined to use that hypothesis to explain why the evidence does indeed exist?

Life is the Creation of God?

Now, consider the alternate hypothesis that Earth and all life on it are the purposeful creation of a God, Who is infinitely powerful and knowledgeable and desires that humanity proliferate. That hypothesis would certainly explain why the Earth not only supports life but also allows it to thrive here, and it would also explain how you have avoided calamity resulting from your own mistakes. The existence of an Almighty God that intervenes for the welfare of humanity explains all of these things quite easily.

But, remember that God is not just raw power or knowledge but, rather, a conscious Spirit – a perspective with desires that He seeks to fulfill. The evidence we have – human life thriving on a macro and micro level – overwhelmingly supports the hypothesis of the existence of an Almighty God, Who desires that human life thrive and intervenes in the world to fulfill that desire.

Now, go back to the principle that, being unable to prove any hypothesis beyond the possibility of dispute or doubt, we have to settle for believing that which we discern to most likely be true. The hypothesis of random creation holds the existence of human life, not to mention its abundance, to be extremely unlikely, but the hypothesis of creation as the result of a God, Who loves humanity, holds the existence and abundance of human life to be not only *a* possibility but the **only** possibility – indeed, a guarantee. Undeniably, an Almighty God has nothing to restrain Him from fulfilling His desires, so if His desire is for human life to thrive, then that is the guaranteed outcome. The atheist's hypothesis makes human life an extremely remote possibility whereas the Christian hypothesis makes human life, and the proliferation of it, a guarantee. Which hypothesis do you believe best fits the evidence at hand?

Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

The atheist hypothesis is alluring to many because it provides a ready answer to that nagging question. To the atheist mind, bad things happen to good people simply randomly – bad luck. Furthermore, atheists would argue that the “bad luck” people experience disproves the Christian hypothesis because a God Who desires that human life exist and thrive would not allow bad things to happen to any human being.

Later in this book, I discuss the reason for hardship in the human experience according to Christian doctrine [see the section titled “Corrective Action”], but for the moment, we are only making an empirical scientific analysis of the existence of God. Even absent Christian doctrine, I would argue that the God hypothesis is still more convincing than the atheist hypothesis simply because human life more often thrives than it experiences calamity. The atheist hypothesis may provide an easy explanation for negative experience, but it also makes positive experience only equally as likely as negative experience since both are asserted to be the result of random chance.

However, the empirical data on human experience is overwhelmingly of a positive nature. Again, as stated earlier, over 99% of us are surviving from one year to the next. On a micro level, I also think that the majority of people would say that the experience of their lives has been more positive than negative. Even when you encounter people who are currently miserable, what do they often say? “Things used to be better.” “Things used to be good.” “I was happy before.”

Thus, even if, at a purely empirical level, we are forced to conclude that neither the atheist hypothesis nor the God hypothesis convincingly explains *all* the empirical evidence, the God hypothesis is still a more convincing explanation of the larger portion the empirical evidence than is the atheist hypothesis.

Why Believe in Yahweh?

My argument for the existence of God will surely leave some people unsatisfied, but it does convince me of God's existence. Even if you come to the conclusion, as I do, that creation is the product of an Almighty God Who loves humanity, why should we conclude that Yahweh, the God described in the Bible, is that God? Again, we cannot prove it beyond the possibility of dispute, but Yahweh, as He is described in the Bible, best fits the empirical evidence of human experience. The Bible describes Yahweh as a God Who loves humanity perfectly, and it explains both how God manifests that love and the reason why God does so love us. This is what ultimately gives the Bible authority in the minds of those who believe it: the Bible best expresses and explains the human experience. The Bible is the word of God, and, importantly, it is a word that is authentic to the human experience.

Chapter 2: Being a Christian

What are the Benefits of Being a Christian?

This is what we really want to know before we even study Christianity or decide to be Christians. What do I get out of it? You may have heard different things about the benefits of Christian faith. Compare the rumors and the facts below.

Rumor	Fact
Being a Christian makes God love you.	God already loves you perfectly regardless of your beliefs.
Being a Christian makes God forgive your sins.	From the very beginning of our existence, God already forgave all the sins that all human beings would ever commit regardless of our beliefs.
Being a Christian makes God offer you eternal life in Heaven.	God offers eternal life with Him to all people regardless of our beliefs.

Christianity, Christian faith, and the benefits you receive from being a Christian have nothing to do with altering God's perspective of you because that perspective was permanently established when God created humanity. God's love, forgiveness, and offer of eternal life for humanity are preexisting and permanent. They cannot change.

You may be wondering, then, what the point is of having Christian faith if all these benefits already exist for all humanity regardless of our beliefs. Well, the benefit of Christian faith is the peace of mind that comes from being certain and assured that God already, perfectly, and permanently loves you, forgives you, and welcomes you to eternal life with Him. To be perfectly clear, whether you are a Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, agnostic, atheist, or an adherent of any other system of belief or no system of belief, God always has and always will perfectly love you, forgive your sins, and welcome you to eternal life with Him in Heaven. God's perspective of all people is fixed and unchanging, but the perspective of any given human being – that is, his or her ability and

willingness to believe and accept those things from God – is the only variable. Christian faith gives you the certainty and assurance that God loves you, forgives you, and invites you to eternal life with Him. The point and importance of Christian faith is that having it empowers you with the boldness to be able and willing to accept, from God, love, forgiveness, and eternal life. Christianity, as a doctrine or system of belief, is the basis upon which to have that empowerment, boldness, certainty, and assurance.

That peace of mind which comes from having sincere Christian faith is what Jesus calls entering “God’s Kingdom” or the “Kingdom of Heaven.” Jesus uses this metaphor because it alludes to the sense of security, comfort, and peace that comes from being a resident of an ideal earthly kingdom. As such a resident, a man would feel physically secure by virtue of the king’s strength, he would feel cared for by the king, and he would also take satisfaction in the fact that the king represents the ideal model of what it means to be a member of that kingdom. Thus, the resident would believe that the king represents the goodness of the common nature of every resident of that kingdom. Similarly, to enter or dwell in “God’s Kingdom” or the “Kingdom of Heaven” is to have the perspective that God, Himself, protects you, loves you, and represents the goodness in your nature. As an explanatory note for the interchangeable usage of the terms “God’s Kingdom” and the “Kingdom of Heaven,” I would point out that the Israelites had a concept of God as being in Heaven,^{xiii} likely because the Hebrew and Greek words, which are translated as “heavens,” refer to the sky, and God is everywhere just like the sky is everywhere. Also, the supreme height of the sky is a metaphor for glory, and God has the greatest glory.^{xiv}

What is Faith?

Faith, formally and most specifically, means trust or belief.^{xv,xvi} Christian faith is trust and belief in God, within the framework of the teachings of Jesus Christ. Often, though, when we refer to faith in God, we are broadly referring to the entirety of our relationship with God, comprising both love and trust. Put another way, having Christian faith is having a spirit of the truth, which describes the relationship between God and humanity. That truth is the subject of the Bible and this book.

What do I have to do to be a Christian?

Being a Christian, in its most basic definition, means believing in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Being a Christian is a matter of what you believe, not what you do. However, the caveat to that statement is that if you truly believe anything, you would naturally express that belief in your words and actions. You would naturally behave in accordance with what you sincerely believe.

Who was Jesus Christ, and what did He Teach?

This natural next question does not have a simple answer. Ultimately, this entire book is about Who Jesus was and what He manifested and taught in His words and deeds. For now, suffice it to say that Jesus was a man who lived in Israel in the 1st century AD. He was Jewish, by faith and ethnicity, which means that He was a member of the ethnic group of Near Eastern people who worshiped their God – the One, True God - known formally as “Yahweh.” Jesus believed that the Jewish faith in Yahweh had become corrupted over time, and He sought to restore it to what it was originally meant to be with His ministry. Accordingly, in order to describe the teachings of Jesus Christ, we must first understand the principles of the Jewish faith, which is also known as Judaism or Yhwism, at the time Jesus lived and in the millennia preceding His life. Those principles are where we will begin our study.

Chapter 3: The Creation Story

The Importance

The Creation Story, as contained in Genesis 1:1 – 2:25, is important not just as a description of the origin of things but, more importantly, because in it is the entirety of Christian doctrine. How can that be when Jesus, the founder of Christianity, does not appear until the Gospel of Matthew? Well, everything in the Bible past Genesis 2:25 was written entirely for the purpose of convincing humanity again of the truth that Adam and Eve knew prior to their corruption by sin. None of the Biblical figures – Moses, Jesus, Paul, etc. - preached anything that was substantially new. Their words and actions only expressed the truth that was originally established in the Creation story.

This is why John 1:1 states, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” The “Word” refers to the truth that is contained in the Creation story, which is why the “Word” was present “in the beginning.” Furthermore, the Gospel writer identifies Jesus with that “Word” because Jesus preached and manifested that same truth.

Accordingly, we are going to examine the Creation story in detail.

Genesis 1:1-2

¹In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep and God’s Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters.

This passage begins with the statement “in the beginning,” which often causes confusion because people will ask, “what was God doing before He created the earth?” The Creation story and the Bible as a whole do not address that question simply because the focus of the Bible is upon the relationship between God and humanity. Thus, it only makes sense that the Bible would begin with the *beginning* of that relationship.

Verse 2 gives a description of existence prior to the creation of the earth. It states that “*the earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep and God’s Spirit was hovering*

over the surface of the waters." Another translation for "the deep" is an "abyss,"^{xvii} and that is really the meaning intended here. Prior to God's creative work, existence was a state of vast, unfathomable darkness and emptiness, which is portrayed as an ocean. Of course, we modern people would argue that the abyss was not empty if it contained water, and a better description of an abyss would be the vacuum of outer space. However, Moses, the author of Genesis, evidently had no knowledge of outer space and the emptiness of its vacuum. The best analogy he could think of for the abyss was an unending sea because under the waters of a sea, it is dark and inhospitable to human life.

The abyss is meant to be a metaphor for the nature of evil, for evil is inhospitable to human life and also ultimately emptiness and nothingness. The Creation story establishes that substance represents goodness, and substance comes only through God's creative work. Put another way, God is good, and goodness only comes from God. The creation of goodness – substance – by God is detailed in the rest of the Creation story. This disparity between substance and nothingness – between good and evil – is also the reason why verse 2 describes God's Spirit as "hovering over the surface of the waters." God's Spirit – God's perspective – hovers over the abyss because it is separate from the abyss. It is separate from the abyss because the abyss represents evil whereas God's Spirit is a spirit of goodness.

The Distinction between Good and Evil

As we will discuss momentarily, God's Spirit is always in agreement with God's true identity, so, in effect, Genesis 1:1-2 establishes that God is good and hence is entirely distinct and separate from evil. Thus, we discern the first important doctrinal point, which is the distinction between the nature of God and the nature of evil. Evil is nothingness and emptiness, which is harmful to human life^{xviii}. God – goodness – is substance, which is necessary to promote human life because human life is substance. God is thus implied to be complementary to human life and entirely separate from evil, which is implied to be contrary to human life. God is the Source, Origin, and Creator of goodness in stark and undeniable distinction to evil. The rest of the Creation story will consistently show this distinction.

Why did God Create Evil?

One question that leads people astray from God is, "why did God create evil?" However, from the preceding explanation, we can see that God did not create evil because evil is not a created thing; it is not substance. Evil is the absence of substance; it is nothingness and emptiness. Emptiness is not created but only results from the absence of substance.

As God is portrayed as separate from the abyss, evil is to be further understood as the absence of God. From a practical perspective, if you create a table, that table now exists wherever you have placed it, but it also simultaneously does not exist, or is *absent*, from every other location. God exists, which by definition means that the absence of God also has to exist. Some will object that God is omnipresent – existing everywhere – and that is true. But, the absence of God to which I refer, and which the Creation story metaphorically describes, is a spiritual absence. This is why Genesis 2 refers to God's *Spirit* rather than God *generally* because the verse is emphasizing the point that while God, in His omnipresence, is present at and aware of every instance of evil in the world, God's Spirit – His perspective, will, and wisdom – is not represented in or by that evil. This principle is proven in human experience as well, for evil exists and is manifested when and to the extent that human beings disregard the will and wisdom of God in their own minds – when they *make God absent* from their minds.

Why would God allow us the power to make Him absent from our minds? Because, He must allow us that power if we are to have free will, for free will cannot exist unless there are at least two options from which to choose. God wants us to have free will because He wants us to love Him, but love, in order for it to be authentic, has to be the product of free will.

Genesis 1:3-25

In this passage, God begins His work of creation, and in that work we see a consistent theme of separating good from evil. God creates light separate from the darkness of the abyss. He establishes the sky, which to the ancient Near Eastern mind was a solid barrier holding back the waters of the abyss^{xix}. God makes dry land appear and creates all the plant and animal life. Notice the repetition of the statement that God created each of these things and “*saw that it was good.*”^{xx}

As described above, goodness is represented by substance – the created things – as opposed to the evil, which is represented by the empty, dark abyss. The meaning of this creative work is that it shows God's will and power over evil in that He is willing and able to create and sustain all of this goodness in the midst of the abyss of evil. Indeed, God was even able to take some of the water of the evil abyss, collect it into seas on earth, and make it teem with life that would provide sustenance for humanity. Furthermore, we are to interpret the earth as being an oasis of goodness in an endless expanse of evil. God created this oasis for the benefit of humanity, which is God's upcoming, final, and best creation of goodness. As human beings reading this story, we are meant to discern not only how much God loves us, that He would create this world for us, but also that we are entirely dependent upon God for our lives. Remember, the sky was understood to be holding back the evil,

deathly water of the abyss. But for the power, will, and love of God, those waters would crush and destroy us.

Some Christians may be troubled by this story for multiple reasons. We know that the sky is really the atmosphere of the earth, and beyond it is the empty vacuum of outer space. Some believe in the theory of evolution and that every living creature exists only because it is the current victor in the “survival of the fittest.” Some believe that the whole universe of celestial bodies is the result of natural processes beginning with the Big Bang. However, even if you believe all of those scientific explanations, the metaphorical meaning of the Creation story is still valid. Whatever process He used, it is still ultimately the result of God’s power and love for us that we exist and have the earth and life on it to sustain us. Furthermore, we are still dependent upon God for our continued existence, for there is much that we cannot control, such as the earth’s orbit of the sun or asteroid impacts upon the earth.

Genesis 1:26-27 – The Most Important Passage in the Bible

²⁶ God said, “Let’s make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷ God created man in his own image. In God’s image he created him; male and female he created them.

In that passage, we find the fundamental truth about God and humanity: **humanity’s true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God; God is the substance and foundation of humanity’s true identity**. This passage, Genesis 1:26-27, is the thesis statement of the entire Bible, which is why it is placed in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible.

The Near Eastern Concept of Identity

xxi,xxii,xxiii,xxiv,xxv

What does it mean to be the perfect image and likeness of God? Well, first we must realize that the wording of Genesis 1:26-27 would have had a very emotional, visceral, and instinctive impact upon the contemporary Near Eastern audience hearing or reading that statement. For Near Easterners, their sense of identity is largely collective and externally-determined. It is collective in the sense that an ancient Near Easterner considered himself to be part of nested collectives – nested unities – including his immediate family, his extended family, his clan, his tribe, his nation, and ultimately his religion. It is a similar situation for relatively modern, particularly rural, Near Easterners. With

the exception of religion, within each collective, the members are also actual or theoretical kin through some ancestor, recent or far past. Each collective is composed of members who have the same, or *unified*, concept of what characteristics are good and honorable for a member of that collective, and those characteristics are typically perfectly embodied by some real or imagined person(s), who is considered the ideal or model of that collective. For instance, in the case of an immediate family, the father or grandfather would likely be considered by the family members – the members of that collective – to be the model or ideal of what it means to be part of that family – that collective.

As a member of a given collective – a *unity* of individuals – a man would expect to be supported and validated, to varying degrees, by other members of the collective. The closer, more immediate the kinship relation between the members, the more support and validation that the members would expect from each other. Furthermore, a man willingly supports and validates the other members of his collective because doing so maintains and strengthens that collective. In other words, it is in his own self-interest to support and validate the members of his collective.

The Near Easterner's attraction to membership in collectives is the promise of protection in a physical, material, and spiritual sense. The physical help takes the form of assistance in fights or battles. The material help takes the form of gifts and loans in one's time of need or the use of one member's socioeconomic influence to help another member obtain a job, legal/governmental assistance, etc. The spiritual protection exists as well because the man of a collective has a greater "reservoir" of honor to draw upon than just his own personal record of behavior. He has a group of people who affirm that his true nature is in accordance with their commonly acknowledged ideal of honor. Additionally, when his honor is challenged, justifiably or not, his collective will stand with him in defense of that honor, for his glory or disgrace reflects upon the other members of the collective as well. Given that the Near Eastern sense of meaningful existence and significance has the prerequisite of honor [see the section titled "Honor and Dishonor"], this protection is not considered merely a luxury but a vital necessity.

Each member of the collective considers the ideal or model of that collective to be the identity that is true, real, and genuine of himself. He believes that the ideal or model identity of the collective is his true identity. Effectively then, each member of the collective believes that he shares the same true identity – the same characteristics - with every other member of the collective, including the ideal figure of that collective. They are all *unified* in their true identity. He strives to behave in accordance with the characteristics of that ideal. When he fails in that effort, he still believes the ideal to be true of him, disavows his deviant behavior, and commits to returning himself to behavior appropriate to his true identity. This is why I use the term *true identity*, for it is in contrast to *practiced identity*. For God, His practiced identity always conforms to His true identity. For humanity, our practiced identity – our behavior – does not always conform to our true identity. We

do not always behave in a Godly way, but our failure to behave in a Godly way does not change our true identity as God's perfect image and likeness.

Recall that spirit motivates behavior [see the section titled "God is Spirit"]. Any person's spirit should be in accordance with his true identity and nature. God's Spirit – the Holy Spirit – never changes. It is always perfectly in accordance with God's true identity, for God cannot be tempted by evil^{xxvi} and, thus, cannot be deceived in His Spirit. Indeed, God is omniscient^{xxvii} and thus perfectly knows His nature of perfect goodness, and perfectly knowing His nature, God would never have a spirit contrary to it. Thus, God would never behave contrary to His true identity. Because we are God's perfect image and likeness in our true identity, we should always have the Holy Spirit as our own spirit and always behave in accordance with our true identity. However, we often have a deceived spirit that is contrary to our true identity and so we often behave contrary to our true identity – our practiced identity often contradicts our true identity. The deception is wrought upon us by evil. Nevertheless, what does not change about us, despite our contrary spirit and contrary behavior, is our true identity as God's perfect image and likeness.

The idea that a man's spirit and behavior does not affect his true identity can be hard for modern, Western people to understand, but think of it in terms of this example. I think most people would associate the name "Michael Jordan" with the concept of "an excellent basketball player." However, if he were to miss one shot, would we be justified in associating him with the concept of "a bad basketball player?" Of course not. We could make the argument, though, that an excellent basketball player would not miss a shot, but we would not think to make that argument about Michael Jordan. Why? Because, Michael Jordan has established himself as an excellent basketball player, so any shots that he misses are not judged by us to be a genuine, valid expression of his athletic nature. The missed shot is thus irrelevant to his nature. What about Michael Jordan as a five-year-old boy, were his athletic skills then equal to those at the height of his career? Certainly not. What about Michael Jordan today as an older man in retirement, are his athletic skills today equal to those at the height of his career? Certainly not. You could make a semantic argument that Michael Jordan was, at one particular time, an excellent basketball player, but at different times in his life was not. Nevertheless, though, if today you heard the name "Michael Jordan," it is highly likely that your first thought would be "excellent basketball player" because that is the identity that he established for himself in the minds of much of the American population. Similarly, God has established humanity, in Creation, to be His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, so any of our behavior that is not befitting of that true identity is not judged by God, nor should be judged by us, to be a genuine, valid expression of our nature. Such behavior is thus empty and unreal. While that analogy may not be perfect, it is the best modern example I can think of that expresses the ancient Near Eastern concept of the unchangeable "ideal" of a man in a collective despite behavior that is contrary to that ideal.

Part of what allows the Near Easterner to believe the reality of his ideal self, despite his behavior that is contrary to that ideal, is his psychology, which considers verbal expression – spoken or written – of the ideal to give that ideal a significant degree of reality.^{xxviii,xxix,xxx,xxxii} Going back to our example about Michael Jordan, part of the reason that we would easily dismiss the relevance of any missed shot is because the judgment that Michael Jordan is an excellent basketball player is commonly expressed by many people. In other words, the regular expression of praise for his athletic abilities makes the belief in him as being an excellent athlete all the easier to maintain. This concept of reality based upon verbal expression is much more effective and significant among Near Easterners than Westerners, and we will see more demonstration of this concept in the section titled “Repentance and Atonement.”

The other relevant aspect of the Near Eastern concept of identity is that it is externally-determined. For a Near Easterner, his belief that his true identity is the ideal identity of his collective depends upon the other members of the collective treating him as if that is his true identity. In other words, if they interact with him – in word and deed – in such a way as to show him honor and respect, then in so doing they indicate that they believe him to be a legitimate member of that collective. With that external validation from his fellow collective members, the man feels emboldened and assured in his belief that his true identity is the ideal identity of that collective because the other collective members have demonstrated that they believe the same about him. If, on the other hand, they hold him in contempt and show him only dishonor, then he will believe, or at least be extremely tempted to believe, that he is not a member of that collective – that his true identity is not the ideal identity of that collective.

Humanity: God's Collective

In Genesis 1:26-27, we have the infinitely wonderful decree that we are all part of the collective in which God, Himself, is the ideal. As if that were not enough, we are all externally-determined to be and validated as members of that collective by not just any member of the collective but by the ideal – the very model – of that collective: God, Himself. For, God **directly** creates and fully knows every human being who has ever or will ever exist.

We can also interpret that we are full, total, and perfect members of that collective because God does not list any exceptions or qualifications in Genesis 1:26-27. In fact, God goes so far as to declare that humanity has dominion over all other living creatures He has made. In the very next verse, Genesis 1:28, God commands humanity to *fill the earth [...] and subdue it*. How could anything less than the *perfect* image and likeness of God be qualified to have such dominion over all this goodness that God created? Remember, we are talking about our true identity, not our practiced identity, so when we say “perfect,” we mean that our **true** identity is the full, total, and

perfect image and likeness of God. However, that does not mean that our spirit and behavior – our practiced identity – is always in accordance with that true identity.

Furthermore, this true identity that we have in God – this membership in His collective – is permanent for all time; it does not change. How do we know this? First, as Malachi 3:6 tells us, God does not change, so surely the perfect image and likeness of God cannot change either. Second, in keeping with God's unchangeableness, God's word is immutable.^{xxxii,xxxiii} God declared our true identity to be His perfect image and likeness when He created us, and God's declarations – His word – cannot be nullified. Third, from a purely deductive point of view, if our true identity changed – if we ceased to be God's perfect image and likeness because of our sins – why would God continue to love us, help us, and call us to repentance? This whole world – this oasis of goodness in an abyss of evil – was created by God purely for the benefit of His perfect image and likeness. If we are no longer His perfect image and likeness – if God's entire purpose for creating all things has been lost – why would God allow us to continue to live and thrive? Why would God perpetuate this world? Most importantly, why would God call us to faith in Him? Our very existence and God's continued pursuit of our love is deductive proof that our true identity in God has not and cannot change.

What is the True Identity of God?

We have established that humanity is part of the collective identity of God, but what is the true identity of God? We know that the substance of our true identity is God, but what is the substance of God? The nature of God's identity is goodness, as opposed to evil; substance, as opposed to nothingness; strength, as opposed to weakness; permanence, as opposed to transience; honor, as opposed to dishonor. [See also the section titled “The Distinction Between Good and Evil”]. Admittedly, the Bible focuses much more upon the fact that humanity is like God in our true identity rather than upon what the abstract, static nature of God is. However, this is only because we best discern God's nature from His relationship with us. Namely, we reckon God to be good because He treats us well. We reckon God to be of the nature of substance because He created the things of substance – the world and all the creatures in it. We reckon God to be strong because He defeats the evil that afflicts us. We reckon God to be permanent because He has *ultimate* victory over all the evil that opposes us and Him. We reckon God to be honorable because He treats us honorably and, in doing so, motivates us to treat Him honorably in return. [See also the section titled “The Nature of the Law”].

To return to the original question – what does it mean to be the perfect image and likeness of God – the answer is it means that in our true identity, humanity shares God's characteristics: goodness, substance, strength, permanence, and honor.

Why does our True Identity Matter?

What are the implications of humanity being the permanent and perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity? From a broad perspective, I refer back to the previous discussion of the benefits of membership in a collective identity: protection on physical, material, and spiritual levels. Namely, being part of God's collective means that you are protected by God: physically by the greatest power and courage, materially by the greatest wealth and generosity, and spiritually by the greatest honor. God protects and delivers us from evil, provides for our needs, and preserves our honor by validating us as being His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, which is the ultimate vindication from any dishonor that we may suffer in life. We can also examine the implications of our true identity in God from a more detailed perspective:

1. All that God knows to be good, even all the goodness that He knows to be part of His own identity, is already and forever part of our true identity. The honor – the glory – that God has is in our true identity as well.^{xxxiv} That which is befitting of God is befitting of us as well:
 - A. It is in God's nature to love humanity because we are like Him, for it is only natural to love those who are like you. Accordingly, God has a Spirit of love toward us, and we are meant to love God and other people as well because both God and other people are like us – they have the same true identity as we do.
 - B. God is wise, and we are meant to discern that wisdom in order to have it for ourselves, for that which is wise in the sight of God would, of course, be wise in the sight of the perfect image and likeness of God. [See also the section titled "The Nature of the Law" where I describe the Near Eastern practice of dreams and visions].
 - C. God is powerful, and we are meant to exercise His power as instruments of that power, all in accordance with the will and wisdom of God, which, again, we are meant to discern.^{xxxv}
2. As sin is not part of the identity of God, sin is also not part of our true identity. This is why God forgives our sins: because they are not part of who we really are.
3. When we behave in accordance with that which God declares to be good behavior, we are not transforming ourselves into good people but, rather, only expressing the goodness we already possess in our true identity. When we behave contrary to that which God declares to be good behavior, we are not transforming ourselves into bad people but, rather, are expressing our state of deception about our true identity. As we already established, our true identity in God is permanent, and no human being with a lucid, sane spirit would behave contrary to his true identity. Thus, any such contrary behavior – any sin – has to be the product of deception. The Bible supports this conclusion with the story of Genesis 3 [see the section titled "Genesis 3: How Sin Came Into the World"].

4. Our true identity is the reason why God desires for us to have eternal life with Him, for it is only natural to desire to be united forever with those who are like you. Our true identity is also the reason why we are able to unite with God in eternal life if we accept His invitation to do so. After all, how could any man unite with God unless that man was perfectly like God in his true identity? [See “Chapter 10: Eschatology”].
5. Our true identity is why we have God’s grace. Grace simply means “favor” in the sense of being favored, liked, and shown kindness because you are favored.^{xxxvi} God loves us because we are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, and because God loves us, He favors us and treats us with kindness – He shows us His grace.
6. Our true identity is the reason why we should obey God’s commands and follow His will for our lives. God loves us because we are like Him, so we can conclude that God’s commands to us must be for our benefit and for the purpose of leading us to eternal life with Him. As is natural to any being, God would only command that which is good for Himself, and because we have God as the substance of our true identity, that which is good for God must, by definition, be good for us as well. Put another way, God’s Spirit is just as befitting of us as it is of Him because our true identity is God’s perfect image and likeness, so the commands that issue from God’s Spirit would have to be good for us. Furthermore, as God’s perfect image and likeness, we can only find fulfillment and happiness by embracing God’s Spirit as our own spirit, and we do that by believing and following the word of God, particularly as delivered by Jesus Christ.
7. Our true identity in Yahweh is the reason why we should worship *only* Yahweh. Yahweh is Almighty God, Who is the Acme of honor and glory, and He extends that honor and glory to us by making us part of His collective identity. Yahweh declares that our true identity is His perfect image and likeness, so His honor and glory is our honor and glory as well. What else in this world – money, people, careers, government, other religions, etc. – offers, or is even able to offer, that same level of honor and glory to each and every human being? Nothing and no one else can offer us the same honor and glory because only Yahweh has that supreme honor and glory, and only Yahweh is the substance of our true identity.
8. Finally, our true identity is the foundation of our faith in God, and it is in the teachings of Jesus Christ that we best know our true identity. Remember, faith in God means, specifically, trust in God [see the sections titled “What is Faith?” and “Faith Revisited”]. The basis upon which that trust is wise instead of foolish is the permanent fact that we are God’s perfect image and likeness in our true identity, for that true identity is what motivates God’s consistent loving behavior toward us. We trust God because He consistently behaves in accordance with a love for us that is motivated by His recognition that we are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity. We trust God because He consistently behaves in a way that demonstrates His belief that we are like Him. Put another way, we trust *that* God loves us, *why* God loves us, and *that* God consistently behaves in a loving way toward us.

Faith Revisited

Recall from the section titled “What is Faith?,” faith, broadly defined, refers to the entirety of our relationship with God, including both love and trust. Note that while we are to love God, we are also to trust in God. The distinction between the two concepts – love and trust – is important because you can love a person but not trust him. Your Christian love of another person should be based solely upon your recognition of that person’s unchangeable true identity being the same as yours [see the section titled “Genesis 1:26-27 – The Most Important Passage in the Bible”], but your trust in that person should be based upon that person’s record of behaving in such a way that he demonstrates sincere belief in a shared true identity with you.

We love God because we are like Him, and He is like us. We love God because of His unchangeable true nature that is the foundation of our true identity, but we trust God because He has proven Himself to be trustworthy, without fail, throughout humanity’s entire history with God. We trust God, as He is described in the Bible, because God has, throughout history, consistently behaved in accordance with His word, as recorded in the Bible. Similarly, we trust the Bible to be the word of God because it describes God as we have consistently known Him to behave. More specifically, we trust God, as described and manifested by Jesus Christ, because God has, throughout history, behaved in accordance with Jesus’ description and manifestation of God. Similarly, we trust in Jesus’ teachings because they describe God as we have consistently known Him to behave. [See also the section titled “Why does our True Identity Matter,” specifically point 8].

Indeed, while love and trust are distinct concepts, they are highly symbiotic, which is why faith, in its broad definition, refers to both. We love God because He is the substance of our true identity, but we are only aware of that fact because it is stated in His word in Scripture. We believe that true identity to be accurate because God has consistently behaved in accordance with that Scripture. In other words, we trust God’s declaration that He made us in His image and likeness because He has consistently treated us with the love, honor, grace, etc. that is befitting of His image and likeness. We trust God because of His consistent behavior and because we know the reason why God behaves that way – that reason being our true identity in Him. This is also why you can only reliably and consistently discern truth from God because only God consistently behaves in accordance with the truth. We love other people because they have our same true identity, but they don’t always behave in accordance with it. Rather, it is **God’s** consistent loving behavior toward all people that convinces us of our common true identity in God.^{xxxvii}

Is this Blasphemy?

Some may feel uncomfortable with the statement that humanity is like God, but this is not blasphemy. First, how can it be blasphemy when our likeness to God is declared by God, Himself, in Genesis 1:26-27? Second, we only have our true identity in God *as part of God's collective*. We are not gods in and of ourselves or independent from God. Furthermore, God is no less God because any one person chooses to reject Him, as if God loses some aspect of Himself in that rejection. The Near Eastern concept of collective identity is not that it is a sum of parts but, rather, an ideal that is fully within each member of the collective.^{xxxviii} In God's collective, we share His identity, but apart from God, we are nothing. In fact, Genesis 1:26-27, in stating what our true identity is, also implies that there is nothing more to us than that true identity. Quite literally, apart from God and aside from our collective true identity in Him, we are nothing, just as the abyss in Genesis 1:2 is emptiness and nothingness because God is not part of it.

The Original Covenant

Not only is our true identity, as the perfect image and likeness of God, not blasphemy, it is in fact the original covenant between Yahweh and humanity. The word "covenant" simply means a formal relationship.^{xxxix} Indeed, the Near Eastern concept of a collective identity is a covenant, for its members are all related in the sense of believing the ideal of that collective to be their common true identity. In the case of the covenant between God and humanity, it refers to a formal relationship between God and humanity. The substance of that relationship, and thus of the original covenant, is contained in Genesis 1:26-27. The formal relationship – the covenant – between God and humanity is that humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity. As described previously [see the section titled "Why does our True Identity Matter?"], that true identity that we have in God has multiple wonderful implications, so, while the covenant can be stated in those brief terms, its significance is broad.

Since humanity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, and the covenant is the formal statement of that relationship, by definition the covenant is permanent as well. It can never be voided or nullified. It can be broken through our transgressions – our sins – but it remains in force despite our ignorance of it or disregard for it. Indeed, the covenant between God and humanity is not just one aspect of Creation. It is the permanent organizing principle of all existence, for God created the entire world for the benefit of humanity because we, alone, are God's perfect image and likeness in our true identity.

You have likely heard the old maxim, “crime doesn’t pay.” What we mean by that statement is that society is structured upon an expectation and enforcement of lawful behavior by all its members. While criminals may prosper in the short-term, society will not tolerate them in the long-term. Criminals will be caught and punished for their crimes. This is an example of what I mean by an “organizing principle.” The covenant between God and humanity is the permanent organizing principle of all existence in that ultimately all things conform to that principle precisely because God established that principle and has the ultimate power to enforce it. God’s commands to us and His interventions in the world are not capricious. Sinful behavior is sin and brings hardship because it contradicts the principle that humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God. Righteous behavior is righteous and leads to joy and fulfillment in Christian faith because such behavior conforms to the principle that humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God. Sin may bring pleasure and righteous behavior may bring suffering in the short-term, but God will always correct these deviations from the organizing principle of all existence – the covenant – in the long-term. [See also “Chapter 4: Righteousness and Sin”].

In Christian doctrine, we often speak of the “Old Covenant” and the “New Covenant.” The former term refers to the Law of God, as contained in the Old Testament of the Bible, and the latter term refers to Jesus Christ. In fact, the Old Testament mentions multiple covenants between God and human beings, but it is important to understand that every covenant between God and human beings is actually a unique expression or form of the same original covenant that is found in Genesis 1:26-27. Thus, all covenants mentioned in the Bible apply to all humanity.

The reason that the Bible refers to each of these covenants individually is simply because the ancient Israelites did not naturally think in terms of separating form and substance. In modern Western philosophy, we often think in terms of separating the two. To our perspective, when confronted with a collection of objects, we naturally think in terms of how those objects can share form or shape but be made of different substances or how those objects could be made of the same substance but be shaped into different forms. To the ancient Israelite mind, what we call an object’s form is only an appearance that *expresses* the object’s content or substance. In other words, to their minds, the separation of a covenant’s form and substance would make the form meaningless and empty, which would be improper because the form *expresses* a significant covenant substance.^{xl}

Since the ancient Israelites did not think in terms of separating form from substance, the specification of a “new” covenant does not necessarily mean that the content or substance of the new covenant differs from that of the old. The similarity between the substances of the new and old covenants is left to the listener or reader to discern by examining the details of both covenants, as described in the Bible.

It is my interpretation that when we read in the Bible of the Law of God, of Jesus Christ, or of any other individual covenant made between God and some human being or group of human beings, that comes after Genesis 1:26-27, we are meant to understand that covenant as a form – an *expression* – of the original covenant in Genesis 1:26-27. Each of these subsequent covenants is an expression of the fact that all humanity’s true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. These covenant expressions in the Old Testament often take the form of God calling a certain group of people “His people,” of promises that God makes to people, and of God’s commands of behaviors that people should practice.

These elements all express humanity’s true identity in God. When we think of God’s “people” in the Old Testament, we typically think of the Exodus-era Israelites and their descendants, but the Israelites were descendants of the same progenitors as those of all humanity: Adam and Eve. In Genesis 1:26-27, God created man and woman in His perfect image and likeness, so Adam and Eve were the first “people of God,” which means that all of their descendants – indeed, all humanity – are also the “people of God.” Admittedly, while we cannot know the minds of people who lived thousands of years ago, it is most likely an accurate statement to say that many Old Testament and New Testament Israelites did consider themselves to be specially favored by God over and above the rest of humanity. However, as I just detailed, that conclusion is erroneous. [See also the section titled “Divine Fatalism”].

Moreover, for all humanity, God promises us good things ***because*** we are all His perfect image and likeness, or to put it another way, all humanity is God’s people. Furthermore, we are to practice certain behaviors ***because*** they are behaviors that are appropriate to the perfect image and likeness of God, and by practicing them, we are reminded and assured of that true identity that we all have.

In their respective chapters, we will discuss in detail how the Law of God and the person and teachings of Jesus Christ both express the same truth of the original covenant, but it is important to note that the very fact that the original covenant is expressed so many times and in so many forms in Scripture, through the course of thousands of years, demonstrates the permanence of the original covenant. This continuity indicates that humanity’s true identity is ***permanently*** the perfect image and likeness of God.

Why is this Fundamental Truth so Infrequently Mentioned?

Aside from Genesis 1:26-27, there are few verses in the Bible that state this true identity of humanity in such a direct and explicit way. There are many passages that heavily allude to it, and, of course, the entire Bible ultimately expresses that truth and its implications. Nevertheless,

contrary to what we might expect, there are few other explicit statements of it. And so, we rightly ask, “why not?”

As I will detail in the discussion on Genesis chapter 3, the fundamental lie of which Satan, being the personification of evil, strives to convince all humanity is that our true identity is not the perfect image and likeness of God. Satan devotes all of his efforts to deceive us in that way, so it makes sense that most people would dispute their true identity, at least the first time they hear of it. Indeed, as I wrote previously, many people would instinctively label it blasphemy to say that humanity is like God, let alone the perfect image and likeness of God. This reflexive response is the product of Satan’s deceptive work upon humanity for our entire existence.

This same resistance to the truth existed in Jesus’ time as well. In fact, we have a Scriptural example of that resistance. In John 10:34-36, Jesus comes as close as He is ever recorded to directly stating the true identity of humanity.

“Jesus answered them, ‘Isn’t it written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods?’ If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture can’t be broken), do you say of him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You blaspheme,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God?’”

In that passage, Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6, in which God states, *“I said, ‘You are gods, all of you are sons of the Most High.’* Those two expressions are the clearest, most direct expressions in the Bible of the true identity of humanity, other than Genesis 1:26-27. Yet, in John 10, when Jesus makes that statement, the people He is speaking to try to seize Him. They wanted to punish Him for stating that true identity of humanity. That is how deep the deception about our true identity lies in the minds of many people, so is it any wonder that the Biblical figures, who did know humanity’s true identity, typically refrained from stating it directly and explicitly? Is it any wonder that Jesus instead typically used parables and other figurative language to express this true identity of humanity?

The Name of God

First mentioned in Genesis 2:4, the proper name of God is “Yahweh.” That name is not a translation but, rather, a transliteration from the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament. A transliteration is simply an expression of a word in its original language in the alphabet of the destination language.^{xli} This transliteration is not universally agreed upon by scholars, as some would render it as “Yehovah” or “Jehovah.”^{xlii}

The concept of a name in ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek does not just refer to somebody's appellation but also to his entire identity – character, reputation, behavioral predispositions, etc.^{xliii,xliv,xlv} In modern, Western culture, we have a similar extended usage for the concept of a person's name, and given the importance of honor in Near Eastern culture [see the section titled "Honor and Dishonor"], we can appreciate how much more significant that extended usage would have been in the Israelite culture of the Old and New Testaments. Furthermore, in ancient Hebrew, names have direct translational meaning.^{xlvi} For instance, the name "Moses" comes from a Hebrew word meaning "drawing out (of the water),"^{xlvii} which refers to the story about Moses being rescued from a basket in the water by Pharaoh's daughter in Exodus 2:1-10.

The name "Yahweh" has meaning as well, but that meaning is disputed by scholars. One of the popular translations, and the one which I believe to be correct, is that "Yahweh" is the causative conjugation of the Hebrew verb meaning "to be" or "to become" but used as a noun.^{xlviii,xlix,l} In the ancient Hebrew language, verbs can be conjugated in such a way that they express a causation of the action that the verb fundamentally describes. Thus, the Hebrew verb meaning "to swallow greedily," when in the causative conjugation, would be translated as "to feed,"^{li} in the sense of "causing to eat." Accordingly, if "Yahweh" is the causative conjugation of the verb meaning "to be" or "to become," then the translation of "Yahweh" would be "to cause to be or become" or "to make." Used as a noun, the translation would be "the cause of one's being or creation" or, more simply, "maker" or "creator."

Given what we have learned from the Creation story, "Yahweh" is then a perfect name for God because God is the cause of the existence of all good things. He is the Maker of all good things. However, the significance of God's name runs deeper than simply His role as Creator because God is also the cause of humanity's true identity. God is the cause of our true identity not only because He gave it to us but also in the sense that God is the substance and origin of our true identity, for our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God.

As it states in Genesis 2:7, "*Yahweh God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*" This is a critical verse because it is essentially another way of stating the content of Genesis 1:26-27. In other words, God conveyed to man the substance of God's own true identity to become the substance of man's true identity. That true identity in God is man's soul. The figurative language used here is based upon the great importance that a Near Eastern man places upon his membership in a collective, from which he derives his true identity [see the sections titled "The Near Eastern Concept of Identity" and "Honor and Dishonor"]. For the Near Easterner, to lose or disbelieve his collective identity is to lose his physical and material strength and his honor. It is to effectively lose his significance, relevance, and value as a person – it is to lose his *life*, in a figurative but nonetheless visceral sense. This is why

we can interpret the “breath of *life*”^{lvi} to be our true collective identity in God, as His perfect image and likeness. That true collective identity is our “*living* soul.”^{lvi} Man became a *living* soul when God made him part of God’s collective identity. Prior to that infusion, man was merely a pile of dust, devoid of identity – we might say a *dead* soul. Indeed, our collective identity in God is here shown to be man’s first and primary collective identity – the collective identity that is the *truest* of all the true collective identities that a man will have in his life. It is greater and more fundamental to his nature than his identity in his family, clan, tribe, etc. Without that collective identity in God, we would be nothing [see also the section titled “Is this Blasphemy?”].

Lastly, a common precept in Judaism is that this proper name of God should not be spoken lest it be even unintentionally used in an irreverent manner. However, if you understand the meaning of God’s name, as we just discussed, I believe that you should use it frequently, particularly in prayer, because it is then a regular reminder to you of the fundamental relationship between God and humanity. I believe that God chose this name for Himself specifically so that we would use it often and, in doing so, remember that our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God.

Elohim

Not only does God’s proper name, Yahweh, have doctrinal significance, but the Hebrew word for “God” does as well. In the Old Testament, when the word “God” is used to refer to Yahweh, it is most often translated from the Hebrew word which has the English transliteration of “Elohim.”^{lvii} The interesting aspect of that word is that even though we translate it as the singular noun “God,” the original Hebrew word is a plural noun, so the more literal translation would be “Gods.” This is why, in Genesis 1:26-27, the translation is “Let **Us** make man in **Our** image, according to **Our** likeness.”^{lviii} The plural pronoun “us” and the plural adjective “our” are used rather than their singular forms because the word “God” in Genesis 1:26-27 is from the Hebrew plural noun “Elohim.”

This situation creates a quandary for us because we know that there is only one God, Yahweh, and Yahweh is, Himself, only one God. Indeed, the name “Yahweh” is a singular noun in the original Hebrew.^{lvix} Nevertheless, the Scripture refers to Yahweh with the plural noun “Elohim.” The resolution to the confusion is that God’s very nature is plural, not in the sense of more than one God but, rather, in the sense of having a *collective identity*. That collective is comprised of Yahweh, as the ideal model, and Yahweh’s children – all human beings – who are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity. As mentioned previously, in the Near East, a man defines himself virtually entirely by the collectives to which he belongs and in which he shares a common identity. Indeed, for a Near Eastern man, the most terrible fate he could suffer is to be permanently alone without family, friends, clan, nor tribe. Such a fate would be to him an identity crisis, even a state

of nonexistence. Thus, it would be perfectly understandable to the Near Eastern mind that God would naturally allude to His collective when referring to Himself.

Put another way, God has a nature of love, or you could say a nature of honor because both love and honor express recognition and validation of similarity to oneself. Love requires at least two parties – the lover and the loved, hopefully with mutual reciprocation. Since God has a nature of love, it makes perfect sense that He would refer to Himself in the plural since his very nature requires a relationship between parties. In fact, that is why God created humanity: to love us and be loved by us. That is why God created us as His perfect image and likeness, for it is only natural to love most those who are most like you. Remember from the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity,” a man expects to be supported and validated by the members of his collective. God gives us physical, material, and spiritual support and validation. While God certainly does not need our physical or material support, He does want our validation – our love and honor.

Furthermore, since humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity, then our nature should be one of plurality, love, and relationship as well. Indeed, that is the case. By our own experience, we know that we desire to love others and to be loved by them. Even Scripture directly alludes to this plural nature that we have. In preparing to create woman, God says “*it is not good for the man to be alone.*”^{lvii} If it is not good for man, who is the perfect image and likeness of God, to be alone, then, by definition, it cannot be good for God to be alone either.

Finally, it is important to realize the glorious truth that if God’s very nature is one of plurality and relationship, even love, and God created humanity as a result of that nature, then our existence and, more to the point, our love for God, is the fulfillment, satisfaction, and gratification of the elemental and inherent desire of God – a people to love and be loved by. Our love for God is a validation to God just as God validates us. God and humanity share the same true identity, so it only makes sense that God and humanity validate each other in that identity. A common cliché is to ask, “what is the meaning of life?” or “why am I here?” The answer is simple yet sublime. God created each one of us for the sole purpose of loving us and being loved by us for all eternity. That is the purpose and meaning of human life.

The Work of Humanity

As part of the Creation story, God assigns work to Adam. That work is detailed in Genesis 2:15-17:

Yahweh God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it. Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but you shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die.”

Before discussing the work of humanity, we must first understand the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of course, the tree is a symbol, but what does it symbolize? The answer is in the name, “the knowledge of good and evil”, but Adam already knows goodness because he lives in the world of goodness, created by God, Who is the source of goodness. Furthermore, Adam, himself, has a true identity of pure goodness, as the perfect image and likeness of God. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, God created the earth as an oasis of goodness/substance in an abyss of evil/emptiness. Thus, the tree really symbolizes the knowledge of *both* good and evil or, more to the point, the corruption of a perfect spirit, that knows only goodness, with the addition of the knowledge of evil. All things being equal, the perfect image and likeness of God would naturally have a spirit exactly the same as God’s spirit – the Holy Spirit. All things being equal, a purely good soul would have a purely good spirit. Our spirits only become less than purely good when we allow evil into our spirits. The ideal of our collective identity – God – never succumbs to temptation to evil, and we aspire to have that same spiritual strength. The symbolic meaning of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the corruption of our naturally, perfectly good spirits with a knowledge of evil.

Getting back to the work of humanity, God commands Adam to “cultivate and keep” the Garden of Eden. Looking at the original Hebrew text, the word translated as “cultivate” means, at its most basic level, “to work.”^{lviii} The work is likely not agricultural because man’s need to practice agriculture only begins in Genesis 3:17-19 as a corrective action for his sin.

The clue to understanding the nature of the work that man is meant to perform, as commanded in Genesis 2:15-17, is in the Hebrew word that is translated as “keep.” That word can also mean “to guard, protect, or preserve.”^{lix} Man is assigned the task of guarding the Garden of Eden, but why would an oasis created by God need to be protected by man? The Garden of Eden is not just a physical location, representative of the whole earth prior to the introduction of sin, but also a symbol of man’s uncorrupted spirit at this time and the perfectly blissful existence it yielded. In this moment, man has a perfectly good spirit – he knows only goodness – and that spirit needs to be protected. The Garden of Eden is a metaphor equivalent to the expression that Jesus uses of “God’s

Kingdom” or the “Kingdom of Heaven.” [See the section titled “What are the Benefits of Being a Christian?”].

If man is to guard the Garden of Eden, we naturally have to ask what he is to guard it from. What is the threat? Again, remember that God created the earth as an oasis of goodness in an abyss of evil. Man is to guard the Garden of Eden, and thus his own spirit, from evil. Of course, God is stronger than evil, so evil cannot penetrate any of God’s creative work, *except* for the one creation to which God gave free will: humanity. We have the ability to choose to allow evil into our lives and our spirits, and that free will means that we are a point of vulnerability in God’s creation – in God’s oasis of goodness in an abyss of evil. The work assigned to humanity is to guard ourselves – our spirits – from the intrusion of and corruption by evil. That was the work of humanity from the first day of its creation, and it is still the work of humanity today and for as long as this life and earth exists. We are to work the earth – this world and this life – into a form that best creates, maintains, and strengthens that right, good spirit within us. Whether it is our personal relationships, our jobs, our societal institutions, etc., all of the aspects of this life and this world should be arranged and structured in such a way that they support that right, good spirit within all people.

This is why the metaphor of the tree is used for this corruption of spirit by evil. The eating of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which is to take the fruit into your body, is meant to symbolize, with clear imagery, the **internalization** of evil into the spirit **within** you. Now, one may ask why God would require any work of humanity since God, in His infinite power, could simply prevent evil from having any access to humanity. Put another way, why create the tree in the first place? First, God desires a relationship of love with us, and authentic love, by definition, has to be the product of free will. Furthermore, free will cannot exist in an environment where there is not more than one choice available. Second, a man working to protect his environment and spirit is meant to be an honor to that man. From the Near Eastern perspective, there is great honor in having a strong father who supports you, but there is only dishonor in being so utterly helpless and ineffective that you rely upon your father to do everything for you. Remember, humanity’s true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, Who is Powerful, so it only makes sense that humanity is meant to know and express some power over our own lives. By controlling what we can in life and only turning to God for help with that which we cannot control, we discern our strength – our honor – both in our own capabilities and in the love and favor that we have from Yahweh, Who has limitless capabilities.

Rest

The days of Creation end with Genesis 2:1-3:

The heavens, the earth, and all their vast array were finished. On the seventh day God finished his work which he had done; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. God blessed the seventh day, and made it holy, because he rested in it from all his work of creation which he had done.

This is an important passage because it indicates that God's natural state is rest. Recall, in Genesis 1:2, before God began His work of Creation, "*God's Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters.*" The Hebrew word, which is translated as "hovering," comes from a root that means "to be relaxed," so "hovering," in this context, is meant to connote motionlessness, like a mother hen brooding over her unhatched eggs.^{lx, lxi} Thus, the Creation story establishes a frame for the days of Creation. Before the days of Creative work begin, God's Spirit is at rest, and after the days of Creative work end, God is again at rest. We can interpret that God's natural state of being – His natural Spirit – is rest, and the days of Creation were an interlude of work during His otherwise restful existence. We can further interpret that God is not defined by His Creative work, for He was God before He began His work and after the work ended.

Understanding God's natural state of being is important because His natural state of being – His natural Spirit - is, by definition, our natural state of being – the spirit that is appropriate for us – since our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. In short, humanity is meant to exist in a state of rest. Specifically, we are meant to exist in a state of *restful, peaceful* unity with God. That natural state accords with the preceding discussion of the "work" that God has assigned to humanity because the only job that God gives us is to simply not succumb to the temptations from evil. Our only job is to refrain from believing Satan's lies and doing evil so that we can have that restful, peaceful unity with God in this life and the next. This concept of peaceful unity with or nearness to God is expressed, by Jesus, as entering "*God's Kingdom*" or the "*Kingdom of Heaven.*" [See the section titled "What are the Benefits of Being a Christian?"].

The metaphor of a natural state of rest should not be taken too far, though, because, of course, doing acts of goodness would be in keeping with our true identity, and God did not lack peace when He was creating the world. Furthermore, God does work in our lives on a daily basis. The larger point, though, is that humanity was not created for toil and anguish. The necessity of work, in the sense of arduous toil, only comes into existence as a measure of corrective action from Yahweh to humanity in response to the introduction of sin into our spirits, lives, and world.^{lxii} By allowing us to suffer

the hardship of arduous toil, God is trying to lead us back to full love for Him and trust in Him [see the section titled “Corrective Action”].

This is corrective action that we all need on a daily basis because we are all daily tempted to define ourselves – our value, our purpose, and our well-being – by our jobs. It is a strong temptation because it has the allure of working to achieve goals and in exchange for that work, receiving money to purchase the things you need to live. This pattern leads us to succumb to the temptation to work ever-harder and ever-more hours, seeking to have personal fulfillment in our jobs.

However, none of us, upon sincere reflection, can deny the emptiness and hopelessness of defining yourself by your job. In the workplace, your value is only as good and your paycheck is only as certain as your last mistake or failure on the job. All jobs come to an end, and if you define yourself and your well-being by your job, then your sense of self and sense of well-being will come to an end as well. Such hopelessness and transience is not befitting of humanity, and realizing that those characteristics are the nature of jobs, you are meant to then seek eternal hope, purpose, identity, well-being, and personal fulfillment from God instead because in God is your true identity. In God is your eternal substance. Just as God was God both before and after His Creative work was complete, our true identity in God transcends any work we do in this life. God is God even at rest, and humanity is God’s perfect image and likeness even at rest.

The Creation of Woman

The Creation story in Genesis gives special explanation of how and why humanity is divided into two genders. Genesis 2:18 gives the thesis statement for the purpose of making two genders: “*Yahweh God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper comparable to him.’*” To us, as Occidentals, this statement does not explain anything, but to the Near Eastern mind, it clearly states the purpose. To reconcile the two viewpoints, we must first ask why it would not be good for the man to be alone. Remember, as we discussed earlier, Near Eastern culture has a collective and externally-determined sense of identity. One man does not make a collective nor can one man, alone in the world, be defined in that culture because his definition requires another person to give it to him or validate it in him.

Of course, we could rightly argue that the man is not alone at this point since God is present as well, and it is God Who gives us our true identity – our ultimate externally-determined identity – which is His perfect image and likeness. However, man discerns God’s validation of him only spiritually. Though God’s blessings to us are an expression of His validation of us, we only discern those blessings to be such validation in our minds. Given that humanity primarily defines and interprets

reality by that which we can perceive with our five senses, we tend to attribute greater significance to direct, sensory action that is undeniably meant to be validation. Specifically to the point in this Creation story, Adam has the true identity that is God's perfect image and likeness, but he has no direct sensory validation of that true identity because there are no other human beings present to so validate him. Even if Adam perceives the world around him to be a blessing from God because of Adam's true identity in God, there is no other person present to agree with him and validate that perspective. In other words, it is easier to believe that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God when there is another person **speaking** words or **performing** actions that validate that true identity in you. Remember, Satan's entire goal is to deceive you into believing that you are not the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity. If the only validation of your true identity in God comes in your spiritual perception of God, then it is easier for Satan to so deceive you than it would be if you also had people in your life speaking words and performing acts of validation of your true identity. This is why it is not good for the man to be alone because by being alone, his susceptibility to being deceived about his true identity is increased. Although, as Genesis chapter three will show, simply having validating company does not make a person immune to Satan's lies.

The second half of Genesis 2:18 is God's determination to make Adam a helper **comparable** to him. This helper is to help Adam remember and believe his true identity by validating that true identity in him. This is why the helper has to be comparable or "corresponding"^{lxiii} to Adam, for how could Adam be validated and assured that he is the perfect image and likeness of God unless that validation comes from somebody who is also the perfect image and likeness of God? Adam's helper must be part of his collective so that she can provide authentic external validation of his membership in that collective.

We also discern this purpose for Adam's helper in Genesis 2:19-20. Before creating woman, God first brings all the animals to Adam for him to name them. The concept of a name in ancient Hebrew does not just refer to somebody's appellation but also his entire identity – character, reputation, behavioral predispositions, etc. Furthermore, in ancient Hebrew, names have meaning [see the section titled "The Name of God"]. Thus, the implication of Adam naming all the animals is that he is effectively defining them, particularly as they relate to himself, but after naming them all, he realizes that none of the animals are like him. None of them share his true identity, so none of them are part of his collective. Accordingly, none of the animals can provide Adam with the external validation of his true identity that he needs.

God then makes woman from one of Adam's ribs. The idea that the raw material of woman comes from man is meant to emphasize the point that woman shares the same true identity as man. She is made from the same "inner content" as man. Additionally, the concept of Eve containing part of the body of Adam is meant to imply the vulnerability he has toward her because of his deep love for her

and his earnest desire that she love him in return. As context, consider the Egyptian novel, The Beginning and the End by Naguib Mahfouz, in which one of the female characters is quoted as thinking, in regard to her lover, “but I love and want him. I am body and soul to him. I have no one else in this world.”^{lxiv} “I am body and soul to him” is an idiom that expresses the same sentiment as Eve being made from the rib of Adam. A similar idiom is found in Genesis 2:22-23, in which God brings the woman to Adam, and Adam says “*this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She will be called ‘woman,’ because she was taken out of Man.*” “Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” are figurative expressions meaning both that the woman is like Adam and also that Adam deeply loves her and wants her love in return. Of course, the two meanings – similarity and love – are complementary because we tend to love most, and feel most validated when loved by, those who are most similar to the ideal identity that we believe about ourselves. Indeed, Eve is depicted as being just as much the perfect image and likeness of God as is Adam. Adam further expresses the similarity between himself and the woman by calling her “*woman,’ because she was taken out of Man.*” The Hebrew words in that passage, translated as “man” and “woman” are very similar. The Hebrew word for “woman” is the feminine form of the Hebrew word for “man.”^{lxv} Just as Adam defined all the animals in naming them, he also defines woman in calling her “woman.” Namely, he defines her as being like him – as having the same true identity that he has.

Genesis 2:24 conveys the woman’s role of validating the man. “*Therefore a man will leave his father and his mother, and will join with his wife, and they will be one flesh.*” In Near Eastern culture, children have the highest respect for their parents, and when a grown son marries, he often continues to live in his parents’ home with his own wife and children.^{lxvi,lxvii} Those facts seem to contradict the statement in Genesis 2:24, and that contradiction serves the point of the statement. The author is using exaggeration to make the point that a man is so very desirous of his wife and her validation of him that he would *even leave his parents to be with her.* He is so desirous of his wife that he would even commit the dishonorable behavior of forsaking his parents, if need be, to have her love.^{lxviii} Furthermore, the man’s desire for his wife is so strong that his union with her is akin to the two being a single person – “one flesh.” In other words, by God’s creative design, the marriage bond between a man and a woman is to be permanent because it is so important to the man’s spiritual well-being. The marriage bond between a man and a woman is to be permanent because the validation that the wife provides to her husband is to be permanent and perfectly reliable. The wife’s validation of her husband as being good, honorable, and righteous makes it easier for him to believe that God considers him to be the perfect image and likeness of God, Who is the Acme of goodness, honor, and righteousness.

Sadly, many people interpret this story as denigrating to women, as if a woman is a mere servant to a man, but it is really meant to convey the opposite meaning. This story is meant to be a glorification of women. First of all, in this account, woman is specifically confirmed to share the same true identity as man; she is just as much the perfect image and likeness of God in her true identity as is the man in his true identity. Additionally, man is identified as having a spiritual

vulnerability – a need for sensory validation. It is woman alone who has the ability to guard that vulnerability most effectively, and man values her immensely as a result. Finally, while the focus in Genesis 2:18-24 is upon the wife validating her husband, the implication is not that the wife is not also validated. In Near Eastern culture, the wife is validated in marriage, but her validation comes primarily from bearing children in the marriage. This passage is not about childbearing, so the wife's validation is not mentioned here.

The Absence of Sin

Genesis chapter two concludes with verse 25: “*The man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed.*” In Near Eastern culture, the connotation of nakedness is typically shame because the figurative implication is that the naked man’s sins are **exposed** to public knowledge. Remember, the Near Eastern sense of identity is collective and externally-determined, so the Near Eastern man considers it imperative to hide his sins from public knowledge, lest the public deem him to be sinful and dishonorable. If the public reckoned him to be such, he would be greatly tempted to believe it about himself.

Verse 25 states that the man and woman are naked but not ashamed. The only way that nakedness could connote an absence of shame is if the naked individuals have no sin to hide, and that is precisely the meaning here. The fact that Adam and Eve were not ashamed means that they believed themselves to be perfectly righteous. In other words, they believed that they were perfectly part of the collective identity of God and that their identity was the identity of the ideal model of that collective: God. Put yet another way, they believed themselves to be the perfect image and likeness of God.

By the end of Genesis chapter two, sin has not yet entered the world. If sin had never entered the world, the Bible would end with Genesis 2:25 since the rest of the Bible is merely God’s attempt to remedy the effects of that sin upon us. The rest of the Bible and all of our temporal lives on this earth are God’s attempt to lead us to believe the truth – to make His Holy Spirit our own spirit – so that we will have the boldness to accept the eternal life with God that He offers to us as our entitlement by reason of our true identity as His perfect image and likeness.

Chapter 4: Righteousness and Sin

Definitions

At the broadest level, righteousness and sin [or “sinfulness”] can be defined, respectively, as “rightness and wrongness” or “accuracy and inaccuracy.” However, in order to have useful meaning, those concepts require some standard to reference, for “right and wrong” imply accordance with or contradiction to some known standard. In the context of the Bible and Christian faith, that standard is the covenant truth, which God has established, that the true identity of all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God. With that summary in mind, let’s examine the terms in greater detail.

We cannot define sin without first defining righteousness. I like to define righteousness as “nearness to God.” Thayer’s Greek Lexicon defines the Greek word for righteousness as “the state of him who is such as he ought to be.”^{lxix} The two definitions really complement each other well because, as we have learned, the true identity of humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God, so the way that we “ought to be” is like God – inherently and spiritually near to God and in close association with God.

As I wrote previously, a man’s true identity in God, which is his soul, cannot change, but his spirit, which is his perspective, can change. Accordingly, then, in one sense, we have a permanent righteousness, which is our true identity in God. Our true identity – our soul – is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, so it is permanently as it ought to be: near to God in the sense that it is like God. Our spirits, on the other hand, vary in the degree to which they accord with the Spirit of God, which is the spirit that is also right for us because of our true identity in God. We should perceive things the way that God perceives them because our true identity is His perfect image and likeness. We should be near to God in spirit in that we should think, understand, and assess as God does. To the extent that we accomplish that goal at any given time, we are righteous in spirit as well as in our true identity. In short, inherent righteousness is our true identity in God, and spiritual righteousness is our perspective of sincere belief in that true identity.

As Christians, one of the principles of our doctrine is that righteousness comes only through faith in God. Faith in God is trust in God, and particularly what we are meant to trust is God’s declaration that we are made in His perfect image and likeness; we are to trust that declaration to be our permanent true identity. This faith in God is the unification of the two aspects of our righteousness

because in faith in God, we have a spirit of sincere belief – sincere trust – in that which God believes: the true identity of all humanity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God.

Of course, our spirit often does not accord with the Spirit of God. We often think differently than He does about any number of matters, which is to say that we often think in a way that is contrary to our true identity in God. That contrary spirit in us is sin. Sin is the opposite of righteousness; sin is distance from God – a spiritual state of disassociation from God. Thayer's Greek Lexicon defines sin as “a failing to hit the mark.”^{lxx} That mark refers to righteousness – being as we ought to be. To the extent that we fail to be as we ought to be, we sin.

Contrary to righteousness, sinfulness does not have two dimensions. Our true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God, in which there is no sin because there is no sin in God. Thus, the only dimension that sin can have in us is in our spirits. We can have a spirit that is contrary to the Spirit of God and contrary to our true identity in God, and such a spirit is sinful. More specifically, the spirit of sinfulness is the spirit of disbelief that the true identity of all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God. Nevertheless, even the worst of sinful spirits can never change your true identity as God's perfect image and likeness.

At this point, you may be confused about these definitions because you are accustomed to thinking of sin and righteousness in terms of behaviors. We often speak of sin and righteousness as being deeds that are bad or good, respectively, and the Bible often describes the concepts in that way as well. We often conceive of righteousness as being obedience to God's commands and sin as being disobedience to them. Of course, deeds are either sinful or righteous, but it is important to understand that any deed only expresses the corresponding spirit that the person committing the deed already has. In other words, a man who commits a sinful deed, must first have a spirit – a perspective – of sinfulness that motivates the deed. In committing the deed, the man expresses his spirit of sinfulness, which is a spirit that disbelieves the true identity of all humanity to be the perfect image and likeness of God. Similarly, a man who commits a righteous deed, must first have a spirit – a perspective – of righteousness that motivates the deed. In committing the deed, the man expresses his spirit of righteousness, which is a spirit that believes the true identity of all humanity to be the perfect image and likeness of God. The righteousness of any righteous deed is only your belief in that fundamental truth – the belief which motivates your commission of the deed. The sinfulness of any sinful deed is only your disbelief in that fundamental truth – the disbelief which motivates your commission of the deed.

Honor and Dishonor

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Because Near Eastern culture, which prizes honor and abhors dishonor, is so deeply infused with religion, the concepts of honor and dishonor are inseparably linked to the concepts of righteousness and sin. At a basic level, honor, as a noun, is the state of being considered good in the judgment of other people, and dishonor, as a noun, is the state of being considered bad in the judgment of other people. Used as verbs, the words honor and dishonor, mean to treat somebody, or yourself, in a manner that expresses your belief in that person's, or your own, honor or dishonor. Another way of defining righteousness and sin is to say that righteousness is the state of being considered honorable in the judgment of God, and sin is the state of being considered dishonorable in the judgment of God. If a Near Eastern man thinks himself to be righteous, it is because he believes that **God** judges him to be honorable. If a Near Eastern man thinks himself to be sinful, it is because he believes that **God** judges him to be dishonorable. Recall that in Near Eastern culture, a man's identity is externally-determined.

For Near Easterners, honor is the prerequisite of a person's meaningful existence, and the collectives to which a man belongs are his primary sources of honor [see the section titled "The Near Eastern Concept of Identity"]. In that culture, the fundamental characteristic that makes one honorable is strength, expressed in various ways, and the fundamental characteristic that makes one dishonorable is weakness, expressed in various ways. Of course, God is of the highest honor because He has the greatest strength. Humanity is of the highest honor as well because we are part of God's collective, as God's perfect image and likeness in our true identity, and because we have the favor of God as a result. We are not only favored by God – the Acme of Strength and Honor – but also strong and honorable ourselves because we are like Him in our true identity. Indeed, at a fundamental level of Near Eastern philosophy, the core characteristic of honor is strength, so anything that is contrary to God cannot be honorable because the opposition of Almighty God renders it weak.

In the minds of the ancient Israelites, the ideal customs and beliefs of their culture – the customs and beliefs that they considered to be honorable – had the implicit approval of God. The Israelites' ideal cultural customs and beliefs were established long ago, going back even to the time of their ancient Patriarch Abraham. Indeed, the Israelites considered themselves to be part of the collective identity of Abraham. The Israelites believed that the ideal customs and beliefs of their culture must be in agreement with the Spirit – the judgment – of God since those ideal customs and beliefs went back to Abraham, with whom God made a covenant.^{lxxii} The Israelites discerned that God would not have made a covenant with a man whose ideal customs and beliefs God considered to be contrary to His understanding of what is right and good. Furthermore, the Israelites reasoned that God is in control of all things, so if the ideal customs and beliefs of Israelite culture were contrary to God's

Spirit, God would not have allowed and helped the Israelites to last as long as they had. The continued endurance and growth of the Israelite congregation signified to them God's implicit approval of the ideal customs and beliefs of their culture.

Thus, the Israelites believed that whatever their culture considered to be honorable must also be honorable in the judgment of God, and whatever their culture considered to be dishonorable must also be dishonorable in the judgment of God. As stated previously, righteousness can also be defined as the state of being considered honorable in the judgment of God. Accordingly, if God considered the ideal customs and beliefs of the Israelites to be honorable, then those customs and beliefs must be righteous as well. Since a man's ideal customs and beliefs express his understanding of his true identity, the Israelites' understanding of their true identity should have been that it was both honorable and righteous. As we will learn later though, the Israelites were deceived about their true identity. For the moment though, I just want to make the point that in the minds of the Biblical Israelites there was an equation between honorable behavior and righteous behavior and an equation between a man being honorable in his culture and society and a man being righteous in the judgment of God. Similarly, in the minds of the Biblical Israelites, there was an equation between dishonorable behavior and sinful behavior and an equation between a man being dishonorable in his culture and society and a man being sinful in the judgment of God.

On a final note about this topic, it is important to understand that in Near Eastern culture, honor and dishonor are not strictly binary conditions. A man's honor, or lack thereof, falls upon a spectrum that is very nuanced in its application and interpretation by the community, and the concept of honor can also be distinguished from the concepts of dignity, self-esteem, prestige, etc.^{lxxiii} In other words, most people in that culture are not judged to be perfectly honorable or totally dishonorable, but, rather, the community will judge a given man as having more honor than some and less honor than others. In writing this book, for the sake of brevity, I use the terms "honor" and "dishonor" as a shorthand for a man's social status in relation to others and for all the elements that contribute to that social status. The same disclaimer should be understood for my usage of the terms "righteous" and "sinful" in reference to a person or group of people. Unless directly specified otherwise, I intend for none of these terms to be applied in the extreme, as if to say that a given man was considered to be perfectly honorable and righteous or totally dishonorable and sinful.

Temptation vs. Righteousness and Sin

Just as we cannot discount the spiritual element of righteousness and sinfulness, we also cannot discount the behavioral expressions of those spirits. We interact with the world through our five senses, so we tend to define reality by that which is expressed in a sensory way. This sensory expression can take the form of action and movement but also the form of spoken or written word.

The reconciliation between the spiritual and behavioral aspects of righteousness and sin is found in the distinction between temptation and succumbing to temptation. God tempts us to righteousness, and Satan tempts us to sinfulness. More specifically, God tempts us to believe that our true identity is His perfect image and likeness, and Satan tempts us to believe that we are unlike God in our true identity. Temptations, though, are only thoughts put into your mind by God and Satan, respectively, for you to consider with their respective hopes that you will put those temptations into action. A temptation only becomes reality – real righteousness or sin - when you behave in accordance with that temptation. Sensory expression is the sign and confirmation that you have accepted the temptation as true – you have made the temptation a part of your own spirit. Put another way, you believe the content of the temptation to be part or expressive of your true identity.

This distinction between temptation and sin relates to the Near Eastern psychology of reality. As I wrote in the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity,” “part of what allows the Near Easterner to believe the reality of his ideal self, despite his behavior that is contrary to that ideal, is his psychology, which considers verbal expression – spoken or written – of the ideal to give that ideal a significant degree of reality.”^{lxxiv,lxxv,lxxvi,lxxvii} Sensory expression, whether action or word, is what gives a thought the significance of reality in your spirit. This is true whether the thought is in accordance with your true identity, as God’s perfect image and likeness, or in accordance with the deception from Satan that sin is your true nature.

Without sensory expression, thoughts in your mind of righteousness or sinfulness are merely temptations that you are currently resisting. This distinction may seem overly technical and also unnecessary since, as we know, sin is not part of our true identity anyway. However, I believe this to be an important distinction to understand because even when you resist Satan’s temptations upon you to sin, Satan will still tempt you further to believe that you are sinful and unlike God simply because the temptations to sin are in your mind, as if they are the product of your true identity. Neither sin nor the temptation to sin is part of your true identity. The temptation to sin is Satan’s attempt to deceive you, and actual sin is your belief in that deception. Temptation to sin and sinfulness itself are ultimately deception; they are the products of evil, so they have no substance. They are empty and neither express nor change anything about your true identity in God or God’s belief in that true identity. However, deception can corrupt your spirit – your perspective – of yourself. God cannot be deceived,^{lxxviii} but you can be deceived into believing that you are not the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity.

As I wrote previously, a core tenet of Christian doctrine is that righteousness comes through faith, but faith is not merely a matter of the mind. Sincere faith in God, particularly in His declaration that your true identity is His perfect image and likeness, would be signified by behavioral expression of that faith. In other words, if you sincerely believe – have the spirit – that the true

identity of all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God, then you will behave in accordance with that true identity; you will behave in accordance with the spirit and commands of God. If, on the other hand, you believe your true nature to be sinful, and thus unlike God, then you will behave contrary to God's Spirit and commands.

Genesis 3: How Sin Came Into the World

Chapter three of the Book of Genesis describes how sin came into the world and the life of humanity. First, recall from Genesis 2:9 that among all the trees that God placed in the Garden of Eden, two were of special note: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Life represents eternal life with God, which Adam and Eve already had in their perfect, sinless existence, so it is reasonable to assume that they were already eating from the Tree of Life. Contrariwise, in Genesis 2:17, God commanded that they "*shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die.*"

This brings us to Genesis 3, and we will start our analysis with verses 1-7:

¹ Now the serpent was more subtle than any animal of the field which Yahweh God had made. He said to the woman, "Has God really said, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?"

² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees of the garden,³ but not the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden. God has said, 'You shall not eat of it. You shall not touch it, lest you die.' "

⁴ The serpent said to the woman, "You won't really die,⁵ for God knows that in the day you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

⁶ When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took some of its fruit, and ate. Then she gave some to her husband with her, and he ate it, too.⁷ Their eyes were opened, and they both knew that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together, and made coverings for themselves.

The serpent represents Satan and evil in general, and verse one describes it as "*more subtle than any animal of the field which Yahweh God had made.*" The Hebrew word, which is translated as "subtle," can also mean "crafty, shrewd, and cunning."^{lxxix} This is an important point because it lets the reader know that the serpent's words cannot be taken at face value, and he should not be underestimated.

First, the serpent asks Eve if God had really said that her and Adam could not eat from *any* tree in the Garden of Eden, and she rightly corrects the serpent that God only forbade eating from the tree in the middle of the Garden, which Genesis 2:9 identifies as the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.^{lxviii} This is the first shrewd tactic of the serpent. He asks a question that he knows has a negative answer specifically for the purpose of giving Eve the opportunity to correct him. Allowing her to correct him makes him seem harmless to her since she perceives that she has superior knowledge than he does.

The serpent's next tactic is to assert to Eve that she will not really die if she eats from the tree and that God only said that would be the consequence because God does not want her to eat from the tree and become like God, knowing good and evil. For us Christians, one red flag in that statement is that it implies that God "knows" good and evil. Remember from our discussion in the section titled "The Work of Humanity," the "knowledge" of good and evil, in this context, refers not to an intellectual, academic awareness but, rather, to a corruption of one's naturally good spirit with evil. God has only a spirit of goodness, so the implication that He "knows" both good and evil, is another subtle deception tactic in the serpent's discourse. The serpent implies that God wishes to maintain a difference between Himself and humanity, in the form of His knowing evil whereas Adam and Eve do not. The truth is that this difference doesn't exist because, again, God's Spirit is not corrupted by evil nor is the spirit of Adam and Eve corrupted by evil at this point. Before being corrupted by evil, the spirit of Adam and Eve is equal to the Spirit of God.

However, these deception tactics from the serpent are only distractions that he uses to conceal the really destructive lie contained within his statement in verse 5. The serpent says to Eve that if she eats from the tree, then she "will be like God," and in that phrase lies the serpent's most terrible and effective deception. By saying that Eve will be like God if she eats from the tree, the serpent implies that she is not *already like God*, and that is the fundamental lie of evil upon humanity. Going back to the thesis statement of the whole Bible, Genesis 1:26-27, the true identity of humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God, so Adam and Eve *were already like God* from the moment of their creation by God.

The deceived perspective, or spirit, that Satan works in us that our true identity is not the perfect image and likeness of God is the spiritual motivation that causes every sinful word and deed that humanity has ever and will ever commit, for the only reason we would ever behave contrary to the will and wisdom of God is if we believe that we are not fundamentally like Him. Put another way, the entire reason that we believe God's commands to be good for us is because we believe that God and ourselves share a common true identity. God would only command that which is good for Himself, and because we have God as our true identity, that which is good for God must, by definition, be good for us as well.

In keeping with our discussion in the section titled “Temptation vs. Righteousness and Sin,” I would like to briefly point out that the serpent’s statement to Eve that eating from the tree will make her like God is the *temptation* that the serpent put into her mind. It only becomes a *sin* when she believes that temptation – makes it part of her spirit – and, because she believes it, she puts it into sensory action by eating fruit from the tree. By eating from the tree, Eve expresses that, just as the name of the tree implies, her spirit, which was previously only good, has been corrupted by evil – that evil being her belief that she is not already the perfect image and likeness of God. She disobeys God’s command to not eat from the tree, which is a behavior that would be befitting only of somebody who perceives herself to be something other than the perfect image and likeness of God. Indeed, Eve’s spirit is corrupted by the greatest evil: disbelief in her true identity in God. She and Adam, who also eats from the tree, now have a perspective of themselves that is less than perfectly good – a spirit that is a mixture of *good and evil* – because they no longer perceive themselves to be the perfect image and likeness of God. Furthermore, by believing themselves to be unlike God, they prevent themselves from having the perfect unity – “life” – that they previously had with God, for how can you accept unity with a God, Whom you do not consider to be like you? The inability to accept unity with God is the death that God foretold, as a consequence of eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in Genesis 2:17.

With that corrupted spirit about themselves, Adam and Eve realize that they are naked, which to the Near Eastern mind implies shame because it creates the imagery of a person’s total self, including his sins, being exposed to the sight and knowledge of everyone. At the end of Genesis 2, before sin entered the world, Adam and Eve were both naked, but they were not ashamed. In Genesis 3:7, now that sin has entered the world, Adam and Eve both realize that they are naked, and this time, they are clearly ashamed because they make rudimentary garments for themselves. Symbolically, they try to cover their sinfulness – their perceived unlikeness to God – from the sight of each other and, more to the point, from the sight of God.

Corrective Action

In Genesis 3:16-19, God responds to the sin of Adam and Eve:

*To the woman he said,
“I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth.
You will bear children in pain.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.”
To Adam he said,
“Because you have listened to your wife’s voice,
and have eaten from the tree,
about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it,’
the ground is cursed for your sake.*

*You will eat from it with much labor all the days of your life.
It will yield thorns and thistles to you;
and you will eat the herb of the field.
You will eat bread by the sweat of your face until you return to the ground,
for you were taken out of it.
For you are dust,
and you shall return to dust.”*

Some people would label this response as “punishment” or “wrath,” but I believe the better term is “corrective action” because God issues these decrees not to satisfy His wounded pride – for God is not prideful – but, rather, to correct the corrupted spirit of humanity. The question, then, is how do these decrees help to achieve the goal of correcting our spirits?

Remember, the fundamental sin that Adam and Eve committed was to believe that they are not the perfect image and likeness of God, and, as a result, they feel different, distant, and separate from God. That deception is the foundation of the sins committed by every human being. In correcting this deception, God addresses the primary productive roles of men and women. While we in modern society may disagree with these role assignments, the ancient Israelites well understood that the primary role of men was to work in agriculture, and the primary role of women was to be wives and mothers.

It makes sense that God would address these roles in His corrective action because in our productive work in this life, we are greatly tempted to feel fully independent and self-sufficient. To the extent that we believe that temptation, we reinforce in our spirits the belief that we are not like God – that we are not part of God’s collective identity. In Near Eastern culture, one of the primary aspects of being in a collective identity is the belief that you can rely on other members of the collective for help when needed. If you believe yourself to not be part of the collective identity of God, then you think that you are not entitled to help from God. The more successful you are in providing for yourself through productive work, the easier it is to continue believing that deception because you have fewer occasions to call upon God for help and witness the help He provides.

To combat that deception about our true identity, God decrees that the primary roles of men and women will be difficult. Men will have to toil to produce crops, and women will suffer great pain in childbirth while still desiring to be married and have children. The logic here is that in this great difficulty, men and women will realize the weakness of their “independent” selves and have no recourse but to appeal to God for help. God, of course, will help them, and, as a result, they will be led to the correct belief and spirit that they are, indeed, part of God’s collective identity as His perfect image and likeness in their true identity.

Applied to all humanity, this corrective action, of allowing us to endure hardship so that we will call upon God for help, will lead humanity to love and trust God because we will see that God does consistently help us, and that help will consistently validate the fact that we are part of His collective identity. We will see that God consistently helps us in our time of need, and we will trust Him as a result. We will discern that God would not be trustworthy to help us if He did not love us and that God would only love us if He believes that we are fundamentally like Him. We will discern that since we are fundamentally like God, we should love God, just as He loves us for the same reason. We will realize that without God, we are nothing but the dust from which we were made, but by embracing our true identity in God, we will know that our value and worth infinitely transcend our flesh. In short, this corrective action will lead us to develop a spirit of belief in the covenant truth.

As God decrees in this passage from Genesis, death is the final corrective action that He sends to all people – all people “shall return to dust.” Namely, in death, we have the opportunity to accept eternal life with God by sincerely and permanently believing the truth that we are the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity. Thus, the transition of death in this life unto eternal, perfect unity with God in the next life is effectively your permanent, eternal belief in the truth.

Let’s shift now to a perspective beyond the story of Genesis 3. God sends all humanity corrective action, both in pleasant and unpleasant forms, as a tool to lead us to create, strengthen, and/or maintain our Christian faith – a spirit of belief in the truth. Blessings are pleasant corrective action, and “punishments” are unpleasant corrective action. Although, all types of corrective action from God are really blessings because they are all meant to help us in our faith in God, but for the moment, we will keep the distinction between blessings and punishments. In receiving a blessing, God either directly intervenes in our lives in a pleasant way, or He simply allows us to enjoy the natural benefits of our righteous behavior. Either way, the blessing is meant to be a motivation to us to maintain and/or strengthen our Christian faith, for the blessing validates our preexisting Christian faith as a good thing. In receiving a punishment, God either directly intervenes in our lives in an unpleasant way, or He simply allows us to suffer the natural consequences of our sinful behavior. Either way, the punishment is meant to be a motivation to us to create, strengthen, and/or maintain our Christian faith, for the punishment warns against our preexisting lack or insufficiency of Christian faith. Put another way, blessings validate righteous behavior to encourage us to continue having a righteous spirit, and punishments censure sinful behavior to encourage us to repent.

From the Near Eastern point of view, the corrective action that God delivers to His people is akin to the oversight – praise and censure – that members of a collective identity practice with each other. For instance, family members closely observe the behavior of each other and issue praise or criticism for that behavior. This typically occurs in the form of older members observing and guiding the behavior of younger members.^{lxxxii,lxxxiii} The logic behind this oversight is that the family

shares a collective identity – a collective honor. The behavior of one family member reflects upon all the family members, so dishonorable behavior by one member is not tolerated by the other members. The same is true of God and humanity. All humanity is part of God’s collective identity – God’s honor – and God will not endlessly tolerate His people being dishonored, even if it is they who dishonor themselves. Rather, God will intervene with corrective action to lead us away from dishonor – away from sin.

The logic of receiving a blessing for righteous behavior and a punishment for sinful behavior is acceptable to us until we observe the occasions in which people who are deep in sinfulness receive a blessing or in which people who behave righteously receive a punishment. While we feel comfortable ascribing the former situation to God’s perfect grace, we often object to people suffering punishments unjustly. This is the classic question, “why do bad things happen to good people?” These situations particularly gall us when a person of overall righteous behavior suffers a hardship because of a sin committed by somebody else. Of course, the easy answer is that God’s wisdom is perfect, and God works in mysterious ways. Those are accurate statements, and it is righteous to trust God’s wisdom even when you do not understand it. However, I would also argue that the logic behind “unjust” blessings and hardships is not beyond our comprehension.

First, remember that from the Near Eastern perspective, all humanity is part of the same collective identity, so the righteousness or sin of one member of that collective reflects upon every member of that collective. In that sense, every member is responsible for the behavior of every other member. Thus, corrective action, whether blessing or punishment, to any member would be justified.

However, even from an individualistic point of view, if a man, who seems to have done nothing wrong, suffers a hardship, perhaps as the result of another person’s sin, that hardship is still an opportunity for that first man to cling all the more intensely to his Christian faith – to trust in God’s will all the more – and, in so doing, strengthen his faith. In the opposite scenario, if a man, who seems to be deep in sinful behavior, receives a blessing, that blessing is meant to lead him to strong faith in God simply by virtue of the stark contrast between his behavior and God’s grace toward him. Namely, that man is meant to be all the more grateful to God, and thus motivated to amend his spirit and ways, when God sends him a blessing despite his sinful behavior, particularly when God works to prevent him from suffering a negative consequence from his sinful behavior. None of us should be too outraged by these situations because ultimately, “unjust blessing” could be used to describe Christian truth, for none of us have done anything to *earn* God’s help. God works in our lives for goodness because He loves us, as His perfect image and likeness in our true identity. But, none of us *earned* our true identity; God simply gave it to us, and He upholds it despite the fact that we all sin.

When we think a hardship is unjustified, we often question God's sense of justice. However, the perfection of God's justice can be discerned in the very fact that He sends corrective action into the lives of all people. Namely, God would only send corrective action into the life of somebody whose spirit He wishes to correct. God would only work to lead a person to strong Christian faith if He desires to be in eternal, perfect unity with that person. The perfection of God's justice is precisely *that* He works to lead *all humanity* to eternal life with Him because *all humanity* is entitled to such eternal life by virtue of the true identity that God gave to us *all*. The ultimate justice or fairness of God is that He made *all humanity* permanently His perfect image and likeness in our true identity and loves us *all* for that reason.^{lxxxiii}

Finally, recall our discussion in the section titled "The Original Covenant," in which I described how the covenant between God and humanity is the permanent organizing principle of all existence. Neither the existence of sin, the temporary prospering of the sinner, nor the temporary suffering of the righteous man in any way nullify or void the covenant, for God works to correct all these deviations from the organizing principle of existence. Sometimes the correction comes in this life, but assuredly, the correction of all deviations comes in the next life to the man who accepts eternal life with God. Jesus said "*heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*"^{lxxxiv} What He means by "*heaven and earth*" are the aspects of this life and this world that deviate from the truth that God has established, truth which Jesus refers to as "*my words.*" The deviations will end precisely because the truth – humanity's true identity in God and all its implications – will ultimately be victorious and endure forever.

The Aftermath

In Genesis 3:22-24, the disposition of Adam and Eve is described:

Yahweh God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand, and also take of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever—" Therefore Yahweh God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

The troublesome part of that passage is in 3:22, "*Yahweh God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.'*" It is troublesome because it contradicts what I have written previously about the substance of the serpent's deception of Eve being that she was not *already* like God. In 3:22, God seems to be saying that Adam and Eve have indeed *become* like God, which implies that they were not previously like God.

However, I would argue, based on my research into Hebrew grammar and vocabulary, that this troublesome statement can just as accurately be translated as “*Yahweh God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one out of us, knowing good and evil’*” or “*Yahweh God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like more one [or ‘one-er’] than us, knowing good and evil.’*” Either way, I would argue that the intended meaning in this statement is that man has become *like* or *as if* he is separate and different from God – unique as compared to God. After all, what is it for a man to be “out of” a collective or to become “more one” or “one-er” – more a unity unto or with himself than part of the unity of the collective – than for that man to be different from the collective? In other words, the man has become like one who is no longer part of the collective identity of God. The author notably makes the important point that man has only become *like* one who is different from God because man has not actually changed in his true identity, which is still the perfect image and likeness of God.^{lxxxv,lxxxvi,lxxxvii} Put another way, man has been *deceived* into believing that he is not the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity. Man no longer thinks himself to be like God and suitable for membership in the collective of God. Man’s spirit, that was previously only good, has become corrupted – a mixture of good and evil – or as Genesis 3:22 puts it, “*knowing good and evil.*”

God further decrees that humanity must exit the Garden of Eden lest man “*reach out his hand, and also take of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.*” This is part of God’s corrective action toward humanity to remedy our corrupted spirits. Again, man’s perspective of himself has become corrupted; he no longer believes himself to be the perfect image and likeness of God. In that state of spiritual corruption, God cannot allow Adam and Eve to continue to eat from the Tree of Life, which is a metaphor for having eternal life. Prior to the introduction of sin, Adam and Eve presumably ate from the Tree of Life and had eternal, perfect unity with God. Now, though, God cannot allow humanity to live forever with the spirit that they are not like God. Such an eternal life would, in fact, be eternal condemnation – separation from God – because Adam and Eve think themselves ineligible to accept unity with God. Put another way, the logic of God’s corrective action of banishing humanity from the Garden of Eden, is that we are not united with God in this life so that we have the opportunity to correct our corrupted spirits, know and believe our true identity in God, and thus be able and willing to accept eternal unity with God in the next life. Alternatively, as I described in the section titled, “The Work of Humanity,” the Garden of Eden can also be interpreted as a symbol of the purely good and uncorrupted spirit in humanity. From that perspective, banishment from the Garden of Eden is merely a metaphor for the fact that Adam and Eve have been deceived about their true identity – their spirits have been corrupted by evil.

In all humility, though I have done ad hoc research into the subject as necessary for my study of the Bible, I would never assert myself to be an expert in the ancient Hebrew language. Thus, I would never dispute a translation in the Bible purely based on my knowledge of the ancient languages.

Rather, I will only dispute a translation if I have both a grammatical or lexical reason for the dispute *and* a contextual reason for the dispute.

I feel emboldened to record my alternate translations of Genesis 3:22, not just because of my research into the ancient Hebrew language, but also because the “official” translation simply makes no sense in the context of the Creation story, of the Bible as a whole, nor of our own life experience. Remember what the serpent said to Eve in Genesis 3:4-5, “*You won’t really die, for God knows that in the day you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*” The “official” translation of Genesis 3:22 has God explicitly agreeing with that statement from the serpent, for in that verse God says “*the man has become like one of us.*” The serpent represents evil, so if God is in agreement with the serpent, God is in agreement with evil. Remember from our discussion of the Creation story that evil is nothingness and emptiness whereas God is goodness and substance. If God is in agreement with evil, then God would have to be nothingness and emptiness as well, and, furthermore, humanity, as God’s perfect image and likeness, would also have to be nothingness and emptiness.

If we accept the “official” translation of Genesis 3:22, then we invalidate the entire Creation story, which is all about a *separation* between good and evil, because that official translation effectively equates good, including God and humanity, with evil. Also, if we accept that Adam and Eve became like God upon eating from the tree, then we must conclude that they were not already like God in Genesis 1:26-27, which means that God was a liar in that passage. If we are going to accept that good and evil – God and evil – are equivalent or that God is a liar and evil is a truth-teller, then we might as well throw away the entire Bible because these conclusions are diametric contradictions to the portrayal of God and evil in the Bible. Furthermore, these conclusions contradict our own sensory experience in life. We are not nothingness, and this world is not emptiness. We are real people living in a real world. We discern that God does good things in our lives, and we strive to do good things ourselves. We discern that God creates substance and communicates the truth, and we discern that evil works destruction and speaks falsehood.

Original Sin: God’s Grudge?

Some people would be inclined to interpret the ongoing banishment of humanity from the Garden of Eden to be evidence that God holds a grudge against us for our sin or for the original sin of Adam and Eve. After all, many people have repented of their sins over the course of the thousands of years since the banishment of Adam and Eve, so why does God not allow those people back into the Garden of Eden?

To begin, whether or not you believe that the Garden of Eden was a literal place, it does have figurative meaning. The Garden of Eden is a metaphor for a man's peace of mind in faith in God, namely his peace of mind in sincerely believing that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. Ever since humanity corrupted its naturally good spirit by believing the deception from evil about our true identity – that is, ever since the sin of Adam and Eve – we have been in a lifelong struggle to resist that deception. Sometimes we successfully resist the temptations to that deception, but often we succumb to them and sin. As a result, we typically do not have lasting peace of mind in this life. This is the nature of the original sin of Adam and Eve being "inherited" by the rest of humanity. Such "inheritance" is not a blame for their wrongdoing that is transferred to us, as their descendants, but, rather, is simply an acknowledgment of the fact that the deception to which Adam and Eve succumbed is a deception to which all human beings succumb in this life. Namely, we are all deceived, at different times and to different degrees, that our true identity is not the perfect image and likeness of God. We are not born with this deception, but we do quickly learn it, even from our formative years, from the corrupted world around us.

Thus, the ongoing banishment of humanity from the Garden of Eden does not symbolize a grudge that God holds against us but, rather, our ongoing deceived spirit. The whole point of Christian faith is to strengthen our spirits, over the course of our entire lives, unto belief in the truth about ourselves so that we can accept eternal, perfect unity with God in the next life. That next life of unity with God – peace of mind in faith in God – is the re-entry into the Garden of Eden that is available to us. It is a re-entry and permanent dwelling that is possible because all those who choose it are those who have Christian faith, in which they confidently believe themselves to be the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity. Put another way, they know and believe that they are loved by God, welcomed by God, and suitable for God. [See also "Chapter 10: Eschatology"].

The “Logic” of Sin

The Genesis 3 story also indicates the nature of sin. Namely, all sin is the product of deception, worked upon us by Satan, that we have accepted to be true. Not only does the story indicate that nature of sin, but deductive logic brings us to the same conclusion. If our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, and God has no sin in Him, then, by definition, no sin can be part of our true identity. Furthermore, as I noted in the section titled, "The Work of Humanity," all things being equal, the perfect image and likeness of God would, by definition, have a natural spirit exactly equal to the Spirit of God. In other words, our natural condition, as God's perfect image and likeness, is to understand and perceive things the exact way that God understands and perceives them. Thus, the only logical explanation for the existence of sin in our lives is that we have been deceived by evil.

As the Genesis 3 story further demonstrates, Satan first deceives us, even if only on a subconscious level, into believing that we are not the perfect image and likeness of God. With that false conclusion in our minds, it is easy for Satan to then successfully tempt us into behaving contrary to God's will and wisdom or, more to point, into behaving like someone who is not the perfect image and likeness of God. Having behaved sinfully, Satan then uses that behavior as an accusation against you in your mind in the vein of "you sinned, so your true identity must be one of sin and not of God."

Of course, that is the abstract, strategic description of Satan's work, but we should also examine Satan's direct tactics upon us to execute that strategy. Typically, temptation to sin begins when we notice some circumstance in our lives that seems unfair, and the injustice of it makes us feel invalidated by God. After all, you reason, God is all-powerful, so the unjust circumstance in your life could not exist without God's toleration of it [for the truth about such seeming injustices, see the section titled "Corrective Action"]. For instance, you notice that somebody has a material possession that you want for yourself. You feel invalidated because that person has it whereas you do not. As the perfect image and likeness of God, we feel deserving of perfect validation because God is deserving of perfect validation. Thus, when we feel invalidated, we are in a state of spiritual vulnerability, and Satan uses the vulnerability as an opportunity to lead us to commit some sin.

Remember, though, Satan, like the serpent, is cunning. His lies and deceptions are multi-leveled. Satan leads us to believe that we are not the perfect image and likeness of God by causing us to feel invalidated by some circumstance in our lives, and then he uses that belief as the foundation upon which to persuade us to behave as if we are something other than the perfect image and likeness of God. However, Satan does not communicate the temptation to commit some sin in such a direct way. He does not put the direct, conscious thought in our minds that we are not like God and so we should act contrary to God's will and wisdom. Doing so would be unsuccessful because, as God's perfect image and likeness, we have an instinctive desire to be validated in that true identity by behaving in a way that is in accordance with God's Spirit. Thus, we would instinctively reject the direct, conscious thought of purposely behaving in a way that we know is contrary to God's Spirit.

Satan's tactic is to tempt us to commit some sinful behavior, which logically would only cause us to feel more invalidated because we are behaving contrary to our true identity in God. Satan does this by convincing us that the sin will actually bring us validation. The tragic irony is that our unchangeable true identity can even be seen behind the deception of sin, for in sinning, we seek the very validation that we already have from God: being His perfect image and likeness in our true identity. Underneath all of Satan's lies and temptations to which we succumb, the single desire that ultimately motivates us is the desire to be assured and certain of our true identity as God's perfect image and likeness. In the previous example, you feel invalidated by God because you do not have

the material possession that the other person has, so Satan tempts you to steal it in order to have that validation. But, stealing is against the command of God, so theft will only make you feel more invalidated. Eve felt invalidated by God because she was not allowed to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and was thus *supposedly* not like God, so Satan tempted her to eat from the tree in order to have the validation of being like God.^{lxxxviii} But, eating from the tree was a direct violation of God's command and would thus only make her feel more invalidated. This illustrates a principle that we will discuss further in chapter 5. Namely, sinful behavior expresses a corrupted spirit – a deficient faith in God - and, in that expression, amplifies that corrupted spirit.

The “logic” of sin and of Satan’s temptations upon us is simply the foundational lie that humanity is not the perfect image and likeness of God. Realizing that to be the foundational lie and firmly believing the truth of your identity is the way to defuse any temptation to sin, for if you believe that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, then you cannot believe that God invalidates you, no matter what your circumstances in life are. If God were to invalidate His perfect image and likeness, He would have to invalidate Himself in the process. Accordingly, if you perfectly believe that God cannot invalidate you, then you are immune to the temptation to sin. Sadly, though, we all fall short of having that kind of perfect faith on a daily basis.

Cleanness and Uncleanness

The Bible describes righteousness and sin, but it also describes conditions in which a person or object is “clean” or “unclean.” These conditions are described primarily in the Old Testament books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and sometimes we refer to these conditions with the terms “Levitical cleanness” and “Levitical uncleanness.” We are tempted to equate cleanness with righteousness and uncleanness with sin. The concepts are similar, in that they are all founded upon a man’s accurate or inaccurate perception of his true identity, but they are not the same.

The most obvious difference between sin and uncleanness is that uncleanness is described as arising from activities that are not morally wrong. For example, causes of uncleanness include, but are not limited to, a man having sexual intercourse with his wife, a woman in her time of menstruation, and a woman who has recently given birth to a child.^{lxxxix} Clearly, these activities are not morally wrong because they are natural parts of our lives as human beings, as we are designed by God. Furthermore, uncleanness is a state of being that is periodically unavoidable for every human being because it arises from natural parts of our lives. Thus, we can discern that being unclean is not an expression of God’s judgment upon one’s character, honor, or true identity. What, then, is the logic behind this code of “cleanliness?”

Every activity that renders a person or object unclean, has associated with it, at least in the mind of the ancient Near Easterner, some sinful or dishonorable concept or some potential evil or calamity. For instance, returning to the example I mentioned previously, sexual intercourse between a man and his wife, despite all its moral rightness, would nevertheless conjure thoughts of potential dishonor in the minds of the husband and wife. Remember that in ancient Near Eastern cities, villages, and nomadic camps, multiple people of one family lived in the same one or two-room dwellings, and the dwellings themselves tended to be close together. We can imagine, then, that an occasion of sexual intercourse between a husband and wife would have been known to multiple people in the vicinity, even just through sound alone. Additionally, in Near Eastern culture, the sexual morality of the women is of the highest priority in a family because a woman's act of sexual immorality would bring the highest dishonor to everyone in her family. Even though, in our example, the woman has not committed an act of sexual immorality – for she had sexual intercourse with her husband – the fact that other men would have heard the couple in the act creates the perception, in the minds of the husband and wife, of vulnerability to such sexual immorality. By having sexual intercourse within the hearing of other men, the couple have effectively broadcast the wife's sexual potential. That sense of publicity yields, in the minds of the husband and wife, a perception of vulnerability to, fear of, and premature despair over the potential sin, dishonor, evil, and calamity that a woman's act of sexual immorality would be, and that perception is the state of uncleanness.

Of course, we modern people would argue that this logic is ridiculous because the wife has committed no sexual immorality nor is there any reason to believe that she will in the future. However, uncleanness is not about what is reasonable but only about what is in the minds of people. Uncleanness is having a spirit of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair regarding some potential sin, dishonor, evil, and/or calamity. It is a spirit of believing that you are dishonorable and unrighteous because you reckon in your mind that the potential sin, dishonor, evil, and/or calamity is inevitable or is a foregone conclusion. Thus, the unclean man's perception of his dishonor and unrighteousness is a *current reality* in his mind. This uncleanness is a problem because it deceives a man into disbelieving his true identity in God. The unclean man feels unlike God and rejected by God because the man deems it inevitable that he is going to incur some dishonor, commit some sin, and/or suffer some evil or calamity.

By labeling these conditions “uncleanness,” Moses makes the point that these common, unavoidable conditions are not indicative of a man’s sin, unlikeness to God in true identity, or rejection by God. Notably, leprosy renders a man unclean,^{xc} but the temptation among the ancient Israelites was to interpret a man’s sickness or disability to be proof that God was punishing the man for some sin that he committed.^{xcii} Diseases are common in the relatively modern, nomadic Near East because of malnourishment, poor hygiene, and unsanitary living conditions.^{xciii} Thus, diseases, including skin diseases, were surely common among the ancient Israelites as well. Moses wisely discerns that if the Israelites equate every instance of these common skin diseases with God’s

punishment of sin, then most Israelites will regularly, if not constantly, feel punished by God for their sins. The vulnerability, fear, and premature despair in the uncleanness of leprosy regards the *foregone conclusion* that the leper is being punished by God for some sin and that he is thus in a state of disfavor with God – disfavor which will have the *inevitable* result that the man will be condemned by God for all eternity. To counteract that false conclusion, Moses makes the point that leprosy is uncleanness, not sin or an indication of sin. In this way, uncleanness is both a recognition of a man’s spirit of deception about his true identity and a means of mitigating that deception until such time that the spirit of uncleanness – the spirit of deception – and any outward manifestation of that uncleanness passes away. In other words, it is likely that a man’s skin disease will heal given enough time, so the priority in the meantime is to help him reject the spirit of deception and maintain his strong faith in Yahweh’s love for him because of his true identity as Yahweh’s perfect image and likeness.

Furthermore, uncleanness of any given person can be a cause of deception for other people in the community as well because in some cases, contact with an unclean person will make the other person unclean. For instance, a woman in her time of menstruation is considered unclean, and anyone who touches her or anything she sits upon is also then considered unclean.^{xciii} The vulnerability, fear, and premature despair involved in this uncleanness concern the concepts of sexual immorality and death. Menstruation is a sign of sexual maturity in a woman, so the further connotation is the potential for her to practice sexual immorality, which as described above, would be a concern for everyone in her family. Menstruation also implies the concept of death to the ancient Near Easterner because any persistent blood loss has the connotation of impending death since death often comes after significant blood loss. The menstruating woman has this spirit of uncleanness and so too does anyone who comes into contact with her. Namely, the knowledge of her sexual maturity may make a man who comes into contact with her have a spirit of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair over the potential sin of fornication or adultery with her. A man who comes into contact with the blood of her menstruation may think of death – the possibility of her death, the possibility of his own death, the memory of the death of other people from bloody injuries, etc. Again, we may think that these connotations are illogical and unreasonable, but Levitical uncleanness is not about logic and reason but, rather, perspective and perception.

In a spirit of vulnerability, fear, and despair, a man feels abandoned by God, but of course, God abandons no man because every man has the true identity that is God’s perfect image and likeness. Thus, the state of uncleanness – the spirit of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair regarding potential sin, dishonor, evil, and/or calamity – must be corrected, and the Bible prescribes various purification practices to remove that uncleanness. For instance, the husband and wife who have had sexual intercourse are to purify themselves by bathing and waiting until the following evening, at which point they are considered clean.^{xciv} As with any ritual, these purification practices work nothing in and of themselves but are only occasions of symbolism and time to help lead the unclean person to dispel his sense of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair and re-embrace his firm

belief in his true identity in God and the honor and righteousness that it yields. In our example about the married couple, after their bathing and the passage of several hours, the memory of the sexual intercourse, and thus also its perceived association with dishonor and sin, will have faded in the minds of the husband, wife, and anyone in the community who was aware of the sexual intercourse. In other words, the spirits of the husband and wife will have returned to a clean state.

The reason that we, as the modern people of God, do not follow this code of Levitical cleanliness is simply because many of the activities and circumstances listed in the Bible as conveying uncleanness do not make us feel the same vulnerability, fear, and premature despair that the ancient Israelites felt. However, there is still a lesson for us modern people of God in the Biblical concepts of cleanliness and uncleanness because today we would call uncleanness by the term “anxiety” or “worrying.” We worry about all kinds of things that are often ridiculous because of the unlikelihood of their occurrence, but those worries nonetheless create in our spirits the genuine feelings of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair regarding potential sin, dishonor, evil, and/or calamity. This worrying makes us feel separated from and forsaken by God – it makes us feel unlike God in our true identity. On final analysis, worrying and Levitical uncleanness are fundamentally the same: a mentally simulated actualization of a feared possible occurrence, an occurrence that would imply your unlikeness to God and thus God’s rejection and abandonment of you. Just like Levitical uncleanness, these worries need to be corrected because despite their illogical nature, they nevertheless work very real spiritual corruption in us. Some modern options for purification from worry include, but are not limited to, prayer, Bible study, and attendance at Christian worship.

Holiness

In the Bible, you will often see the term “holy” used in reference to people and objects in much the same way that the term “clean” is used. In fact, the two terms really mean the same thing. The definition of the Hebrew word, which is translated as “holy,” is “set apart.”^{xcv,xcvi} Just as with cleanliness and uncleanness, holiness is a matter of spirit – a matter of perspective. You are holy to God – *set apart for God* – because your true identity is His perfect image and likeness, but you only know yourself to be holy to God when you know and believe that true identity. An object is holy to God when you perceive it to, in some way, express or reflect your true identity in God. Accordingly, we consider our churches, altars, Bibles, sacramentals, etc. to be holy because they symbolize, in one way or another, the covenant truth. However, the objects are not holy in themselves but only as a result of how we perceive them in our spirits.

Externalization of Personal Perception

One of the challenges for Western readers of the Bible is that we often fail to consider the Near Eastern psychology and philosophy of the very Near Eastern speakers and writers of the Bible. As we have already discussed, righteousness and sin are both ultimately matters of your perspective of yourself, which is to say your perspective of your true identity. There are some statements made in the Bible that seem, to the Western reader, to indicate the exact opposite and, instead, describe a righteousness and sinfulness that is entirely decreed by Jesus and/or God based solely upon the lifelong perfection of your loyalty to Them. I provide two examples below:

Matthew 10:32-33: *“Everyone therefore who confesses me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven.”*

Luke 9:26: *“For whoever will be ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory, and the glory of the Father, and of the holy angels.”*

Both of those passages are the recorded words of Jesus, and they both sound, to the Western reader, to be very harsh, unforgiving, and even vindictive. However, if we simply take into account the Near Eastern psychology and philosophy of the very Near Eastern Jesus Christ, we gain a completely different impression of these passages. Remember, Near Easterners have a concept of identity that is virtually entirely externally-determined [see the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity”]. They believe, or at least are very tempted to believe, themselves to be that which other people judge them to be, and they discern that judgment from how other people treat them. Their perspective of themselves is governed by external judgment. Thus, it makes perfect sense that they would envisage and verbalize that concept with the imagery of somebody else pronouncing judgment upon a man. This is the imagery used in these passages in which Jesus and God are pronouncing judgment upon a person.

Knowing then that Near Easterners have this externally-determined sense of self, the correct way to interpret these passages is not as external judgments but as a man’s perspective of himself. In other words, these passages describe, **in an externalized way**, a man’s perspective of himself as being like God or not. Jesus is preaching to His Near Eastern audience with phrasing that accords with their instinctive way of thinking. Namely, the way that a Near Eastern man would conceive of being like God is with the imagery of God and God’s Son – Jesus – confessing him. The way that a Near Eastern man would conceive of himself being unlike God would be God and God’s Son denying him.

Indeed, much of the Bible is written with figurative language and imagery – even poetry – precisely because Hebrew thinking is done in highly dynamic terms.^{xcvii,xcviii} This kind of externalized and figurative thinking also appears in more modern Near Eastern literature as well. In Naguib Mahfouz's novel, Cairo Modern, the character Mahgub's anticipation of the honor and prestige of his upcoming job promotion is described as follows: "Then the words evolved into images: an armchair surrounded by assistants as many people of all classes approached deferentially."^{xcix}

All that Jesus is really saying in these passages is that if you do not have faith in Him – that lack of faith being expressed in forms of being ashamed of Jesus like denying Him in the presence of others – then you will feel and believe yourself to be unloved and rejected by God. Why is this the case? Quite simply, Jesus preached and manifested the true identity of humanity as being sons of God – the perfect image and likeness of God. Knowing yourself to be inherently like God is the only way you can ever feel assured that God does love you because it is only natural for God to love those who are like Him. In fact, Luke 9:26 contains a telling allusion to this sense of self-perception. Notice in that verse that Jesus says "[...] of him will the **Son of Man** be ashamed [...]."^c As you will read in the section titled "Son of Man and Son of God," Jesus as "the Son of Man" means that He represents the truth about humanity. Thus, for the Son of Man to be ashamed of you, means that the truth about you is ashamed of you. Translating that **externalized** concept of identity into the Western, internalized form, if you are ashamed of Jesus, then you disbelieve the truth about yourself. In other words, passages like these, that can seem to us Westerners to deprecate a man's spirit about himself, actually emphasize it when considered through the lens of Near Eastern philosophy and psychology. The passages are not about gaining the acceptance or rejection of God and/or Jesus but, rather, are about your belief, or lack thereof, that you already have Their acceptance because you are God's perfect image and likeness in your true identity, just as Jesus is.

Additionally, the Biblical tendency toward externalization is not limited to a man's perspective of himself but also to his perspective of other people and subjects. Any man with faith in God wants to believe that Yahweh agrees with his perspectives on other people and subjects, and some Biblical figures satisfy this preference by conceiving of Yahweh as having and speaking a perspective that agrees with their own perspectives. In other words, these Biblical figures project their own judgment of a matter or person upon Yahweh. In the passages above, Jesus demonstrates this concept in that He foretells of people's acceptance or rejection of Him as having consequence related to their standing before God. We see another example of this concept in Exodus 32:9-14, in which Moses has a vision of God about the Israelites having made a golden calf idol in Moses' absence.

Yahweh said to Moses, "I have seen these people, and behold, they are a stiff-necked people. Now therefore leave me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them, and that I may consume them; and I will make of you a great nation."

Moses begged Yahweh his God, and said, “Yahweh, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, that you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians talk, saying, ‘He brought them out for evil, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the surface of the earth?’ Turn from your fierce wrath, and turn away from this evil against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of the sky, and all this land that I have spoken of I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

So Yahweh turned away from the evil which he said he would do to his people.

This passage is disturbing to read at first because it seems to indicate that Yahweh had evil intention toward His people and that Yahweh was not perfectly wise since Moses was able to convince Him to change His mind. However, what is really happening in this passage is Moses externalizing his personal perception. Moses is the one who is furious with the Israelites for having made the idol, hopes for their destruction, and is tempted to abandon them, but Moses imagines that such anger is expressed by Yahweh. Moses goes on to supposedly convince Yahweh that it is righteous to forgive the Israelites and continue to guide them to the Promised Land. Again though, this is simply Moses projecting upon God his own mental processing of this incident. It is Moses who, though he is furious with their behavior, still loves the Israelites as part of his collective identity, and he knows that his honor is tied to their honor for the same reason.

This externalization upon God of his own perception allows Moses to feel justified and honorable in his sequence of emotions and thoughts on this matter. In other words, Moses validates his initial anger by thinking in terms of “even God would be just as angry about the Israelites’ behavior.” Moses then validates his repentance from that anger and desire for vengeance by thinking in terms of “but God’s anger would not last long because God would know that righteousness is not served by destroying His people.” Additionally, the narration here casts Moses in a very honorable light, as he portrays himself as a close confidant and counselor of God. Even from a Western point of view, this is not an unrighteous depiction, for while we do not change God’s mind about anything, He nevertheless listens to our concerns and responds to them in the way that He knows is best. Certainly, God holds all humanity in the highest honor because we are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity.

We may rightly ask how we can consider the Bible to be the word of God – the expressed Spirit of God – if the Biblical figures and authors freely imputed their own beliefs onto their description of the Spirit of Yahweh. Ultimately, the justification for considering the words uttered and the visions experienced by Biblical figures as the word of God is that those Biblical figures express the authentic covenant truth in some way. Their words and visions reflect the fact that humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity and all the results and implications of that true identity. To wit, however harsh Jesus’ words in the passages quoted above may seem to us,

they do express the truth that believing your true identity in God yields spiritual nearness to God and disbelieving it yields spiritual separation from God.

Furthermore, this externalization allows Moses to express his belief, and the truth, that the Israelites are still part of God's collective identity despite their sins. This is why Moses "reasons" with God using the argument that if God now forsakes and destroys the Israelites, then that action will only bring dishonor and disgrace, in the sight of the Gentiles, upon the Israelites and upon God as well. Yahweh publicly claimed the Israelites as His people when He miraculously led them out of Egypt, so if He were to destroy them now, even considering their sins, Yahweh would show Himself to be weak and dishonorable. Namely, the peoples of the area would interpret Yahweh to have forsaken His own people only because they were utterly dishonorable. Since the Israelites are God's people, if He publicly testifies to their dishonorable nature by destroying them, then He would implicitly be testifying to His own dishonor, for the dishonor of some members of a collective is imputed to all members of the collective. Also, the Israelites' ruin would be seen by the Gentiles as a disgrace and humiliation to God in the nature of a father who is too weak to protect his children. Again, the underlying implication in this discourse – the reason it is supposedly persuasive to God – is that the Israelites are still part of the collective identity of God. They are still His perfect image and likeness in their true identity despite their sins. That is the authentic covenant truth that Moses conveys in his writing in Exodus 32, and because it expresses the truth, Moses' vision and words about it are in accordance with the Spirit of God. Put another way, Moses' words are the word of God because they express the covenant truth that God established.

Moses also emphasizes the permanence of the Israelites' true identity by appealing to God for Him to remember the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – whom God deemed to be His faithful people. Despite the Israelites' sin, they are still part of the collective identity of those Patriarchs and so are still part of God's collective identity. This is all human reasoning on Moses' part, but Moses believes that God upholds this reasoning as the truth. Thus, Moses conceives of these thoughts in the form of a conversation with God in which God accepts and believes Moses' arguments. This is another reason why Moses externalizes upon God his belief that God will continue to love and support the Israelites. Namely, Moses so externalizes to express the fact that this belief is God's belief – God's Spirit – as well.

Moses' imputation of his beliefs onto Yahweh's Spirit is valid not only because Moses' beliefs accord with the covenant truth but also because Yahweh's subsequent behavior demonstrates God's agreement with Moses' beliefs. God continues to show love and support for the Israelites and all humanity. If Moses' belief in the permanence of the Israelites' true identity in God was not shared by God, then God would not have continued to help the Israelites. If all humanity was not permanently the perfect image and likeness of God despite our sins, then God would not continue to help any of us. The fact that the Israelites went on to eventually dwell in the abundant land of

Canaan proves that Moses' discernment and imputation of his conclusions upon God was accurate and justified, for nothing can happen without God's active involvement or passive approval. This leads us to our next discussion on the topic of Divine Fatalism.

Divine Fatalism

Another aspect of Near Eastern psychology and philosophy that is important to understand is the belief in divine fatalism.^{c_i} To the Near Eastern mind, since God is omniscient and omnipotent, then, by definition, all things that happen must be within the scope of God's will. Put another way, Near Easterners believe that a man cannot do anything or experience anything that is contrary to the will of God. Everything that does happen must be the consequence of God's active involvement or, at the very least, of God's passive permission or tolerance. Thus, the Biblical speaker or writer deems it necessary to characterize any positive or negative occurrence as a choice made by God. This instinctive need to acknowledge the ultimate power of God is also another reason why the contemplation and decision-making of human beings is often described in the Bible with the language of externalization, as discussed in the previous section.

A classic example of divine fatalism is in the Exodus story. While the Israelites are attempting to secure Pharaoh's permission to leave Egypt, Pharaoh frequently opposes this desire. More than once, the Bible characterizes that refusal as Yahweh "*hardening*" the heart of Pharaoh.^{c_{ii}} To the Western reader of the Bible, this phrasing is very disturbing and nonsensical because it portrays God as working against His own will. In other words, if God wants the Israelites to leave Egypt, why would He inspire resistance to that departure in the mind of Pharaoh? The answer here is that the phrasing is simply an expression of the Near Eastern belief in divine fatalism. Nothing can happen outside of God's will, so Pharaoh resisting the Israelites' departure would have to be part of God's will. The Near Easterner does not perceive a logical discontinuity here simply because the overarching principle of logic is that everything that does occur is part of God's will. For the Near Easterner, logic is upheld in this phrasing about Pharaoh, despite God's desire for the Israelites to leave Egypt, simply because the phrasing expresses the fact that God is in control of all things. Of course, this reasoning is unsatisfactory to the Western reader, but, nevertheless, it was the reasoning of the people who wrote the Bible. Therefore, at the very least, the Western reader should feel permitted to overlook the logical discontinuity that *he* perceives here, for the Near Eastern author of Exodus most certainly did not intend any doctrinal implication in the phrasing other than the supremacy of God's will. Indeed, given that other verses in the Exodus story refer to Pharaoh hardening his own heart,^{c_{iii}} it is virtually certain that the two different versions of the phrasing were considered interchangeable in the mind of the author simply because even if divine fatalism was not directly expressed, it was implicitly understood by the Near Eastern audience that he had in mind.

Another example of divine fatalism in the Bible is Deuteronomy 7:6, which states “*For you are a holy people to Yahweh your God. Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, above all peoples who are on the face of the earth.*” Such statements indicating God’s special favor for the Israelites over other people are found elsewhere in the Bible as well. It is important to understand that these statements are not to be taken literally. As we have already discussed, all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity because that is how God created all humanity. Accordingly, *all* people are called by God to have faith in Him, but the point is that the Israelites believed themselves – their lineage – to be those of humanity who were most enduringly faithful to Yahweh even after other people strayed from Him.^{civ} The Israelites believed that Yahweh blessed them specially as a result. Statements that apply God’s special favor to the Israelites are really just an example of the Near Eastern psychological principles of divine fatalism and externalization of personal perception. Namely, the Israelites felt especially honorable because they considered themselves to be the *only* people to have *exclusive* faith in Yahweh. By the logic of externalization of personal perception, Moses expresses that special sense of honor with the phrasing of God having specially chosen – or honored – the Israelites over all other people. Furthermore, faith in Yahweh is a man’s choice, but by the logic of divine fatalism, all things are in the control of Yahweh. Thus, Moses expresses the Israelites’ choice to have *exclusive* faith in Yahweh with the phrasing of Yahweh having specially chosen them as His *exclusive* people.

One consequence of this Near Eastern belief in divine fatalism is the equation of hardship with God’s punishment and disfavor. These hardships could take multiple forms: injury, disability, illness, poverty, a reputation of being unrighteous and dishonorable, etc. When a man suffered a hardship, that man and society in general would have likely concluded that God afflicted him with the hardship because of some sin that he committed. An excellent example of this reasoning comes from John 9:1-2: “*As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’*”

Of course, while God does send us corrective action in response to our sins, that corrective action is not an expression of abandonment but of love because God desires that the corrective action would lead us away from sin and back to strong faith in Him. However, the unrighteous temptation resulting from belief in divine fatalism is to believe that a man in a state of hardship must be in that state because God has forsaken him in his sin. The temptation is to believe that God has rejected the man suffering hardship and thus declares that man to be unlike Him. This was a prevalent belief among many of the people popularly-considered to be righteous in the time of Jesus, such as the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees. A selection from one of Jesus’ parables illustrates this belief:

Luke 18:11-12: *The Pharisee stood and prayed by himself like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of men: extortionists, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.’*

The prejudicial judgment by the Pharisee is stark in that passage. He thanks God for making or causing him to be different than the people in society who suffer the hardship of being considered dishonorable and unrighteous – “*extortionists, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*” Thus, the Pharisee must believe that God has caused and upheld a stratification among people, such that God accepts some and rejects others. Indeed, the Pharisee’s prayer implies that God made some people to be sinners, so the Pharisee must believe that their dishonor and unrighteousness is God’s design and will for them. If God designed them to be sinners, then, by definition, God designed them to be unlike Him. The Pharisee expresses no belief in the possibility of repentance for these sinners; he expresses no belief in any redeeming quality about them. These judgments are, of course, untrue of God, but the point is that they are what Jesus perceived the Pharisees to believe, and Jesus was a keen observer of the society and culture in which He lived.

The problem that modern Westerners have with this concept of divine fatalism is that it seems to present problems of logic, such as: If God controls everything, then God must have it in His will that people will sin. If God controls everything, then God must determine who will and will not have Christian faith. If God controls everything, how can humanity have free will? The Near Eastern mind does not seem to wrestle with these logical discontinuities because the Near Eastern speaker and writer tends to only focus upon the point he is trying to make in any given moment without consideration of how that point or his argument could conflict with other points or arguments. If he is speaking about the importance of a man practicing righteous behavior, then he would make use of the concept of man’s responsibility for his actions. If he is speaking about the importance of a man facing hardships with strong faith in God, then he would make use of the concept of divine fatalism. He would reason that because God is in control of all things, God must have caused or allowed the hardship to occur, and God will deliver the righteous man from his suffering.

I do not think that there is a reconciliation of the two concepts – divine fatalism and human free will – that I could give which would satisfy everybody. What I can do is describe how I reconcile them to my own satisfaction. Namely, I do not think that there is actually a logical discontinuity between the two concepts. I believe that God makes every man with the capacity to choose good or evil – to believe the truth or to be deceived. Yes, when God makes a man, He knows immediately every decision that the man will make in the course of his life. However, just because God knows what a man will choose does not, to my mind at least, mean that it is not still that man who makes those choices. One might argue that God would then have the duty of not making any human being whom He knows will choose evil, but such a policy would contravene human free will rather than uphold it.

Additionally, I tend to look at the question from another perspective. Specifically, under what conditions would most people consider human free will to be genuine? I would argue that most

people would believe in the validity of free will only if human decision-making could be surprising to God. People would be satisfied with their free will if they believed that they could make choices that God does not expect. However, think of the implication of such a condition. If humanity can be surprising to God, then that would mean that humanity has a degree of power over God and a degree of knowledge that exceeds the knowledge of God. In that scenario, humanity would not have a true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God but as something greater than God. Ultimately, the concepts of divine fatalism and human free will do not trouble me because I believe that the real logical discontinuity is the idea that a man can have greater power and knowledge than God.

Finally, remember that God gave us free will and makes the maintenance of human free will a top priority because He desires that we love Him, and authentic love can only be the product of free will.

Chapter 5: The Law of God

Definition

In both Judaism and Christianity, the Law of God is a primary part of the doctrine, and to begin our discussion of the Law of God, we first must define to what the term refers. When we say “the Law of God,” or just “the Law,” the meaning can vary based upon the context. There are three possible meanings.

First, the most narrow and formal definition of the Law of God is the direct commands of God to His people, as recorded in the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – which are also known collectively as the “Pentateuch.” Second, at a broader level, the Law of God would also include the commands and teachings of other prominent Biblical figures, such as Jesus and Paul, because as Christians, we believe that they understood the Spirit of God and so spoke and/or wrote commands that are in keeping with that Holy Spirit of God. These commands are also recorded in the Bible.

Third, at the broadest level, the Law of God also refers to the teachings of prominent religious scholars in Judaism during Biblical times, often referred to in the Gospels as “scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees.” These teachings include the written Law of God, found in the Pentateuch, but also the interpretations, elaborations, applications, and expositions of that written Law, and even additions to it, by the prominent religious figures of the time. These religious scholars would have based their teachings not only upon their own discernment but also upon a combination of the written Scriptures, teachings from their own, more prominent teachers, and the ideal customs and beliefs of Near Eastern culture. Recall from the section titled “Honor and Dishonor,” in the minds of the Israelites there was a perceived equation between honorable behavior and righteous behavior and a perceived equation between a man being honorable in his culture and a man being righteous in the judgment of God.

Some people might argue that the teachings which exceed the content of the written Law of God do not qualify as part of the Law of God. While I agree that these teachings can be flawed, it is important for us to understand that the average Israelite during Old and New Testament times was likely illiterate, did not have easy access to the written Scriptures, and/or did not have the free time to study those Scriptures.^{cw} For the average Israelite then, he likely learned, on an intermittent and potentially second-hand basis, the Scriptures in general and the Law of God specifically virtually

exclusively from what the “religious scholars” of the day taught orally. For the average Israelite in the time of Jesus, the Law of God was whatever those religious scholars said or implied it to be in their words and behavior. Again, I am not suggesting that all the teachings of these scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees formally qualify as the Law of God, but in order to properly understand the cultural environment in which Jesus lived and ministered, we must realize that for the average Israelite of the time, all of these teachings did qualify as the Law of God precisely because it was these prominent religious scholars who promulgated them.

To provide a completely hypothetical example, there is no command from God, recorded in the Bible, that says that a man *must* divorce a disobedient wife. However, according to the mores of Near Eastern culture, it is a dishonor to a man if his wife is publicly known or witnessed to be disobedient to him. If a group of scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees were publicly discussing the topic of divorce, one of them might reference Genesis 3:16, where God says to Eve, “*Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.*”^{cvi} That scholar might then conclude and say, based on that verse combined with prevailing Near Eastern custom, something like “a disobedient wife is in violation of God’s will and so she is worthy of being divorced.” He might make this comment as a mocking response to a story about a man who did not divorce his disobedient wife.

If I was an average Israelite of the time, with no independent knowledge of or access to the Scriptures, and I, along with most people, regarded these scholars as experts on the Law of God, then I might easily infer that the scholar’s meaning is that it is commanded by God that a husband must divorce his disobedient wife. I, and most of my fellow average Israelites, might further infer that it would be sinful and dishonorable in the sight of God if a man does not divorce his disobedient wife. This inference would be all the easier to make given that the Israelites, including those “religious scholars,” looked upon such a man as being shameful, and they equated dishonorable behavior with sin. In other words, we can see how a combination of the scholar’s authority, the audience’s lack of education, and the cultural customs and beliefs upheld by the scholar and the audience could lead to flawed conclusions.

The Nature of the Law

I would argue that the written Law of God in the Pentateuch and the teachings of the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees largely, although not entirely, expressed and agreed with the preexisting customs, philosophy, and psychology of the ancient Israelite culture, going back to the time of the Patriarchs. This combination of customs, psychology, and philosophy was largely that of ancient semi-nomadic Near Easterners, a category to which the Israelite Patriarchs belonged. Likely the only difference between the Israelite Patriarchs and the other semi-nomadic Near Easterners of their time was the Israelite Patriarchs’ exclusive worship of and allegiance to Yahweh. In the minds of the Israelites of

Moses' time, the customs, psychology, and philosophy of their Patriarchs was the standard of honor. Furthermore, as described in the section titled "Honor and Dishonor," behaviors which the society of that time and place deemed to be honorable were also perceived to be righteous and in accordance with the Spirit of God, hence such behaviors were deemed to be part of God's Law. In the same vein, behaviors which the society deemed to be dishonorable were also perceived to be in conflict with the Spirit and Law of God and, thus, were considered sinful.

Of course, that is a bold supposition to say that the Law of God was not a completely novel creation, so how do I justify it? First, I refer you to the section titled "Why Study Near Eastern Culture." Ancient Near Easterners, like relatively modern Near Easterners, placed heavy emphasis upon tradition and precedent. For them, philosophical principles, social customs, moral values, methods of performing different kinds of work, and virtually every other aspect of their lives was the same as it was for their fathers, grandfathers, and generations far further in the past. For them, things were the way they were because they had always been that way. Precedent meant honor and authority, including the honor and authority of God because, as we discussed, the ideal customs and beliefs of the Israelites were considered to have the implicit approval of God [see the section titled "Honor and Dishonor"]. With that in mind, can you imagine how the ancient Israelites would have reacted if Moses brought them a Law full of commands that were completely new and different from their cultural heritage? They never would have accepted that Law or Moses' leadership. Rather, Moses must have brought them commands that already made sense to them. He must have brought them commands to behave in ways that they already deemed to be honorable because anything else would break precedent and thus be dishonorable and lack authority.

Second, we must realize that when the Bible reads of Yahweh *saying* something to a person, it often means that the person was having a dream or vision.^{cvi} We all know what dreams are, but visions are best described as a waking state of deep contemplation upon some topic. Thus, where the Old Testament describes Yahweh as *telling* Moses what the commands of the Law are, in many cases Moses was likely actually in a state of deep contemplation about various topics of life and faith in God, and he discerned the commands of the Law of God in that state of contemplation. This is not to say that God *never* supernaturally spoke to people in the Bible with His audible voice nor that God was not involved in the creation of the Law. Rather, it is simply likely that many instances of God *speaking* were actually dreams and visions that the recipient had. These dreams and visions are what we Westerners would call "divine inspiration," but the Near Eastern mind typically renders the internal thought process with imagery of externalization [see the section titled "Externalization of Personal Perception"]. Hence, Moses writes about God *speaking* to him. God assuredly guided the thoughts of Moses in these states of contemplation. Nevertheless, given that the discernment was taking place in the mind of Moses, it only makes sense that the result of the discernment would be expressed within the context of a combination of what Moses already knew about God's identity and behavior and the culture in which Moses lived. Put another way, it makes sense that Moses

discerned the commands from the *Most Honorable* Yahweh to be commands of behaviors that ancient Near Eastern culture *already deemed to be honorable*.

You may object that if the Law of God was discerned by Moses through visions, then how do we know that he discerned the actual commands of God and not just some creations of Moses' own imagination. In other words, if it was not always the audible voice of God giving the commands of the Law to Moses, then on what basis can we say that the Law is of God and in accordance with the Spirit of God? How do we know that God had a role in Moses' formulation of the Law? By the Near Eastern belief in divine fatalism, God is in control of all things, so the fact that God continued to guide and protect Moses and the rest of the Israelites, who presumably followed the Law of God most of the time, would have been interpreted as God's implicit approval of the commands that Moses delivered to the people. The continued endurance and growth of the Israelite congregation validated the presence of the wisdom and spirit of God in their customs and in the Law of God, which largely accorded with those preexisting customs.

Additionally, at a more abstract level, it is perfectly righteous and in keeping with the Spirit of God for the Law of God to be in accordance with the preexisting ancient Israelite honor code – their customs, philosophy, and psychology – precisely because that code commands behaviors that convey honor and forbids behaviors that convey dishonor. As human beings, we have the greatest possible honor: a true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God, Who is the Acme of honor. We are meant to know and believe that true identity we have in God, so to achieve that belief, we must know and believe that we are honorable. Accordingly, it makes sense that the commands by which God wants us to live are those that validate the fundamental honor in every human being, for God would surely want His perfect image and likeness to be honored just as He is honored. By validating the honor of somebody else, you not only help that person to know and believe his honor but also help yourself to know your own honor because you express in word or deed your recognition that you and that other person have the same honorable true identity in God. By honoring the other person, you also honor yourself. By validating his true identity, you also validate your own, identical, true identity.

The Israelites – and by extension all humanity – are meant to eagerly and joyfully follow the commands of Yahweh because following those commands is an honor to them. Such behavior expresses their true identity as God's perfect image and likeness both because the behaviors are those of honor and because the behaviors were commanded to them by God. In other words, the commands of God to the Israelites are an expression of God's Spirit that all humanity is inherently honorable. Put another way, God honors humanity by commanding us to behave honorably.

Also, keep in mind that because the Near Eastern man's concept of his identity is predominantly determined externally by what other people think of him, as expressed by how they treat him, Near Eastern culture has a tradition of reciprocation in their social interactions. As a Near Easterner, you would treat a man with honor not only as an expression of your belief that he is honorable but also as an expression of your belief in your own honor, for you are seeking to bring honorable treatment upon yourself in return. When you treat another man with honor, you motivate him to treat you with honor in return, for if he did otherwise he would fear that you may come to think of him and treat him as being dishonorable in the future. Your validation of him helps him to believe his honor, and his reciprocal validation of you helps you to believe your honor. The reverse is true as well. When you treat a man with dishonor, you not only express your belief that he is dishonorable but also your belief that you are dishonorable. That statement can be confusing, but the Near Eastern logic is that when you dishonor another man, you motivate him to treat you dishonorably in return, and only a man who considers himself to be dishonorable would seek to bring such treatment upon himself. Similarly, a man who thinks himself to be honorable would behave toward others in such a way that would motivate them to treat him with honor.

Indeed, the commands of the Law of God convey honor to the other person precisely because the practitioner of a given command practices it with the expectation that he would receive equal treatment if the situation was reversed. By treating somebody in the way that you think is befitting for him to treat you, you imply that you consider him to have equal honor to you. Put another way, you imply that you and he have the same honorable true identity. As Jesus said, "*therefore, whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them; for this is the law and the prophets.*"^{cvi}

Again, remember that a Near Eastern man's sense of identity is largely determined by what other people think of him and how they treat him, but each man still has a fundamental belief in what his identity *should be or what he wants it to be*. That desired identity would be the collective identity which he feels is appropriate for him, but in order for the man to feel confident that the collective identity is *actually* true of him, he needs to be validated as having that identity by other people in that collective. Thus, a man will behave in a way that motivates the appropriate people to treat him in accordance with that identity he desires.^{cix,cx,cxi} This is what Jesus means in that previous quote: the Law of God and the Prophetic books of the Bible command and exhort people to behave in an honorable way toward each other so that everyone will feel assured of their true, *honorable* identity as God's perfect image and likeness. Thus, each man who desires to have the collective identity in God would be validated as and assured of having that true identity.

The Law of God is thus a tool to help all people have faith in the covenant truth. Your compliance with the Law of God expresses, maintains, and amplifies your belief in humanity's true identity – our honor as the perfect image and likeness of God – and your disobedience of the Law expresses,

maintains, and amplifies your disbelief in humanity's true identity. Indeed, practicing the Law of God toward somebody is your honoring that person as having the same true identity as you, and transgressing the Law of God toward somebody is your dishonoring that person as not having the same true identity as you. This is why the Law of God specifically states, "[...] *you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"^{cxxii} The Law of God is all about behaving in accordance with your true identity and treating other people in accordance with their same true identity. In practicing the Law of God, you express your belief in the true identity of all humanity and, in that expression, maintain and amplify that belief both in yourself and other people. When you comply with God's Law in your interaction with another person, you express your belief that both you and the other person have the same true identity in God, you validate that true identity in that person, and you motivate that person to validate that true identity in you by complying with God's Law in his treatment of you.

Even if reciprocal treatment does not come to you, compliance with the Law of God still works as a kind of self-affirmation of the spirit within you that motivates you to comply with the Law in the first place. Sincere belief is expressed in word and deed, and having a record of behavior expressing such belief makes that belief seem all the more genuine and accurate to you. In other words, the more you behave like the perfect image and likeness of God should behave, the easier it is for you to believe that to be your true identity. The more you behave contrary to that true identity, the harder it is to believe it to be your true identity. Thus, even absent appropriate reciprocation from others, the Law of God is still a tool to help you have faith in your true identity in God.

In Matthew 22:37-40, after being asked which is the greatest commandment in the Law of God, Jesus replies:

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. A second likewise is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

At their most basic levels, to love and to honor both mean "to validate." Loving your neighbor and loving God are expressed in action, namely behaving in accordance with the Law of God. The whole Law is dependent upon those two commandments because the combination addresses the validation of your true identity in and from the two places where that true identity is found: God and humanity. When you love your neighbor, you validate the true identity in him that you have in you as well, and, in accordance with the Near Eastern custom of reciprocation, you invite and motivate that man to treat you in such a way that validates your true identity. When you love God, you validate the true identity of God

that is your true identity as well, for you are the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity. Now, it would be wrong to say that anything we do “invites or motivates” God to love us because God constantly loves us totally. However, in accordance with the Near Eastern custom of reciprocation and the psychology of externalization of personal perception, when you love God, you create the perception in your mind that God does love you, or, put another way, when you love God, it is *easier* for you to believe that God loves you.

Remember that Moses discerned the Law of God to be commands from God, so by commanding that we honor each other, God must want us to know our honor, which implies that God, Himself, knows us to be honorable. Indeed, God, Himself, honors us by commanding us to live in a way that helps us to know our honor. This makes sense because our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, Who is the Acme of honor. When we obey the commands of God, we submit to God’s authority because we recognize that He is the foundation of our true identity, and, thus, His commands must be good and right for us to follow. By obeying God, we honor God, and as detailed previously, such obedience makes it easier for us to believe in God’s love and honor of us. Namely, when we follow the command to have no other gods but Yahweh,^{cxiii} we are meant to interpret, by the Near Eastern principle of reciprocation, that there is nothing in God’s work of Creation that has greater value to Him than humanity. We have no God but Yahweh, and Yahweh has no *special* creature other than humanity. Yahweh is our *exclusive* God, and humanity is *exclusively* God’s favored creation. Furthermore, when we follow the command to not use God’s name in vain,^{cxiv} we are meant to interpret, through the principle of reciprocation, that God does not use our name in vain. Keep in mind that the ancient Hebrew concept of a name included the reference to the totality of a person’s identity.^{cxv} Thus, we have high regard for God’s identity, and we are meant to interpret that God has high regard for our identity. These commands make sense because God and humanity are part of the same collective identity; humanity’s true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God.

The Ten Commandments

As Christians, we often place special emphasis on ten specific ordinances in the Law of God, and they are aptly referred to as “The Ten Commandments,” which are found in Exodus 20:3-17 and Deuteronomy 5:7-21. Both accounts are presented in the context of the scenario in which the commands were delivered to the Israelites. They are described as being spoken by God directly to the gathered congregation of Israelites, but, surprisingly, God does not preface these ten commands with any special emphasis or explanation. Thus, the natural question to ask is what makes these ten commands so special that they are given unique emphasis in the Old Testament and in Christianity. One answer would be that they are the ten commands that are written on the stone tablets of the

covenant, but that answer still does not explain the unique significance of these commands in contrast to the rest of the Law of God. In other words, yes these ten commands were uniquely written on the stone tablets, but why were those ten commands chosen for that distinction?

The only unique characteristic of The Ten Commandments, in contrast to the rest of the Law of God, is simply that they are the *first* ten commands that God speaks directly to the Israelites, and after hearing them, the Israelites are stricken with fear and plead with Moses to instead be their intermediary with God. They want Moses to receive the commandments directly from God and then relay them to the congregation. Moses describes the scene in Deuteronomy 5:23-27:

When you heard the voice out of the middle of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, even all the heads of your tribes, and your elders; and you said, “Behold, Yahweh our God has shown us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the middle of the fire. We have seen today that God does speak with man, and he lives. Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear Yahweh our God’s voice any more, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the middle of the fire, as we have, and lived? Go near, and hear all that Yahweh our God shall say, and tell us all that Yahweh our God tells you; and we will hear it, and do it.”

The Israelites know that Moses can hear God’s commands in God’s own voice and live, but they hear God’s voice and believe that they will die. The death that they refer to is metaphorically the feeling of being condemned and physically their execution as part of God’s wrath. In other words, when the Israelites hear God’s commands in God’s own voice, they think only of how they have transgressed those commands in the past, and in that perception, they feel rejected by God. When they hear God’s voice issuing commands, they interpret the commands as a judgment of condemnation upon them by God, and they assume that God will accordingly kill them. Moses, on the other hand, had faith in God strong enough to understand that these commands from God were God’s validation of the Israelites, which is why Moses did not feel condemned upon hearing these commands directly from God, or as the passage puts it “God does speak with man [i.e. the man Moses], and he lives.”

It is only the Israelites’ weakness of faith in God – weakness of belief in their true identity in God – that causes them to be afraid of God’s speaking commands to them. Their state of deception about their true identity is what prevents them from feeling validated by these commands and the fact that God delivers them directly in His own voice. Not only are the commands themselves meant to be a validation of the people by God because they are codifications of preexisting Israelite cultural customs [see the previous section], but also the fact that God speaks directly to the Israelites in His own voice is meant to be a huge validation of the Israelites by God as well. God speaking directly

to them implies that God feels a deep intimacy between Himself and the Israelites, and that should be extremely validating to them because God is the substance and ideal model of their true collective identity. They are being validated by the very ideal of their own true identity. This kind of intimacy between God and man is a characteristic of Moses that is lauded in the Bible. In Exodus 33:11, it is written, “*Yahweh spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.*”

Let's now return to our original question of what makes The Ten Commandments so special compared with the rest of the Law of God? Namely, they are the ten commands that God spoke directly to the Israelites, and in so doing, God expressed extreme honor and validation for the Israelites, just as a man would for his **friends** – those he considers to be like him. This is also the reason why The Ten Commandments were written on the stone Tablets of the Covenant. Remember, the covenant between God and humanity is that our true identity is God's perfect image and likeness, which is the highest possible validation and honor that God could extend to any creature. The Ten Commandments were inscribed upon the stone tablets not so much so that the Israelites would remember those particular commandments, although we certainly should remember and heed them, but more so that they would remember God's high esteem for the Israelites because of their true identity in Him. The Ten Commandments inscribed upon the stone tablets were meant to be a perpetual symbol and reminder of the permanent friendship that God established between Himself and all humanity – our permanent true identity as God's perfect image and likeness.

The Law of God as the Code for God's Collective

Remember from our description of collective identity [see the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity”], a Near Eastern collective has an ideal or model, who embodies the characteristics befitting all the members of that collective. As God's perfect image and likeness in our true identity, humanity is part of God's collective, and God is the ideal or model of that collective.

One of the fundamental characteristics of God's collective identity is honor [see the section titled “What is the True Identity of God”]. Accordingly, the Law of God is the code by which humanity, as members of God's collective, is meant to live so that we best know, communicate, and validate to each other that fundamental characteristic of our collective identity: honor. We are to treat each other honorably because we are inherently honorable by virtue of our shared true identity as God's perfect image and likeness. The commands of the Law of God describe ways of treating people honorably so that we all are regularly reminded and convinced of our inherent honor and, thus, our true identity in God.

This is a crucially important point to understand: the Law of God is not a standard that we have to meet to qualify for likeness to God, not a tenuous identity that can easily be lost with any act of sin, nor a standard we must transform ourselves into in order to obtain God's love and favor. Rather, the Law of God is a code of behavior that is already and permanently befitting of us because of our preexisting and permanent true identity in God. Honorable behavior and treatment is befitting of people who are already and permanently honorable. The Law of God is only a tool of expressing, maintaining, and amplifying our belief – our faith – in God that the true identity in Him which He declared us to have is preexisting, permanent, and real. Jesus said, “*the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*”^{cxvi} That logic applies to the entire Law of God, not just the commands about observance of the Sabbath; the Law of God was made for us – a tool for our benefit – not the other way around. To the extent that we comply with the Law of God, we know and express our true identity in God. To the extent that we disobey the Law of God, we express disbelief in our true identity in God, but our disbelief does not change our true identity. As I described in the section titled, “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity,” sinful behavior is not a genuine, valid expression of our true identity, so such behavior is empty and unreal in relation to our true identity.

Keep in mind also that the Law of God, while communicated by God to the Israelites through Moses, was not meant to apply only to the native-born Israelites, for God considers all humanity to be part of His collective since all humanity has the true identity that is His perfect image and likeness. There are many places in the written Law that extend provisions and commands to the foreigners who dwell with the Israelites. One very notable example is Leviticus 19:33-34, which states “*If a stranger lives as a foreigner with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who lives as a foreigner with you shall be to you as the native-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself.*” Notably, the commands of the Law of God frequently refer to one’s “neighbor,” which is a reference to the Bedouin concept of a “tent-neighbour” or “Qasír.”^{cxvii,cxviii} Bedouins are nomadic Near Easterners, and a tent-neighbor is somebody who pitches his tent close to the tent of the man whose protection he desires. A stranger or foreigner dwelling among the Israelites would have done so most likely as a tent-neighbor. This relationship is available to all who seek it, for “it is practically never refused.”^{cixix} The open availability and applicability of this relationship is very significant in how the Law of God expresses the common true identity of all people as being the perfect image and likeness of God.

In this relationship, the protector treats the tent-neighbor as well as, if not better than, he treats his own kin, and vice-versa. The two men are typically from different tribes, but they treat each other as though they are part of the same collective identity. They honor each other in that treatment. It makes perfect sense that the Law of God would so often incorporate a reference to this relationship, which is practically available to all who desire it, because the whole point of the Law of God is that all people should validate each other as having the same honorable true identity. In practicing the Law of God, we are meant to express, maintain, and amplify our belief in that **common**, true

identity in all people and God. As stated in Leviticus 19:18, “*you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” As Jesus demonstrates in the Parable of the Good Samaritan,^{cxx} your neighbor is he whom you choose to treat as your neighbor. By extension, your neighbor is he whom you choose to recognize as having the same true identity as you. If you have faith in God’s declaration that all humanity is His perfect image and likeness, then that recognition should extend to all people and to God.

The proselytism in the Law of God is also seen in Exodus 12:48-49:

When a stranger lives as a foreigner with you, and would like to keep the Passover to Yahweh, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it. He shall be as one who is born in the land; but no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. One law shall be to him who is born at home, and to the stranger who lives as a foreigner among you.”

Moses makes it clear that any foreigner is welcome to join the Israelites’ through faith in Yahweh, as signified by the males of the foreigner’s family being circumcised. Furthermore, any foreigner who chooses to have faith in Yahweh is to be treated just like a native-born Israelite. The only justification for this open invitation is God’s recognition that all humanity is His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, and God accordingly desires that we all have faith in Him.

Thus, the significance of Moses’ extension of the Law of God to “strangers” and “foreigners” and his use of the word “neighbor” in the commands of the Law of God is that the validation which the Law is meant to help people express and believe applies not just to the native-born Israelites but to anyone who seeks to be part of the Israelite community. By implication then, any person is worthy of that aforementioned validation. Hence, the universal true identity of humanity, as God’s perfect image and likeness, is contained in the Law of God. As an example, consider Deuteronomy 15:1-3:

At the end of every seven years, you shall cancel debts. This is the way it shall be done: every creditor shall release that which he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not require payment from his neighbor and his brother, because Yahweh’s release has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may require it; but whatever of yours is with your brother, your hand shall release.

Notice the equation made in that passage between one’s “brother” and one’s “neighbor.” They are to be treated equally. Furthermore, the passage also implies that once a foreigner becomes your neighbor, you should no longer consider him a foreigner, for the passage first equates the neighbor with the brother and only then distinguishes treatment of the foreigner from the treatment of the brother. Thus, the foreigner who is treated differently from the brother, must be the foreigner who is not your neighbor or, put another way, the foreigner who has not sought to become part of God’s

people. The point here is not to create a stratification between believers and non-believers but, rather, to demonstrate that the only thing which can keep you from the honor of being one of God's people is simply your refusal to take your rightful place among God's people – your refusal to believe that you are already one of God's people by virtue of your preexisting true identity in God.

This extension of the Law, and its attendant validation, to Gentiles makes perfect sense because it is all humanity, not only the native-born Israelites, who have the true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God. Yes, God chose the Israelites as His people but not to the exclusion of other people. All humanity, by virtue of our true identity in God, is invited and, indeed, entitled to be part of God's people; we need only to accept the invitation and exercise the entitlement. The Israelites were meant to be an example and a beacon to all humanity of the wonderful truth that applies to us all [see also the section titled "Divine Fatalism"]. Certainly, Jesus and His disciples, in their ministry, built upon and fulfilled this intended role for the Israelites.

Honor and Righteousness

Before we move on from the description of the nature of the Law of God, I would like to remind the reader of the content in the section titled "Honor and Dishonor." Namely, recall this passage:

In the minds of the Biblical Israelites there was an equation between honorable behavior and righteous behavior and an equation between a man being honorable in his culture and society and a man being righteous in the judgment of God. Similarly, in the minds of the Biblical Israelites, there was an equation between dishonorable behavior and sinful behavior and an equation between a man being dishonorable in his culture and society and a man being sinful in the judgment of God.

In the preceding explanation of the nature of the Law of God, I repeatedly refer to the mutual and reciprocal expression of honor between people and God such that all people can better know and believe their true identity in God. In all those references to honor, it is easy to forget that for the Biblical Israelite, honor in his culture and society also meant righteousness in the judgment of God. That equation is why practicing commands that expressed honor helped people to know their true identity of righteousness in the judgment of God – their true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. Today, in modern society, many Christians would likely say that the people and behaviors that are considered honorable in our culture and society are contrary to the Spirit of God and thus contrary to righteousness, but that was not the perception of the Biblical Israelites about their culture and society.

The Fear of God

For Near Easterners, who have a concept of identity that is collective and externally-determined, fulfillment, or happiness, comes only through being externally validated as a genuine member of that collective to which a man desires to belong. That validation comes only from other collective members, including, and most satisfyingly, from the ideal model of that collective. In the case of the Israelites and all those who consider Yahweh their God, that collective is Yahweh's collective, and that ideal model is Yahweh. As previously described, the Law of God is meant to be a means by which that external validation can be expressed to each human being. When you follow the Law of God, you honor – validate – other people as being the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity, and, thus, you motivate them to validate you in the same way. Honoring God, by following His Law, maintains and amplifies your belief that God does validate you as being His perfect image and likeness in your true identity [see the section titled "The Nature of the Law"]. Thus, the Law of God was always meant to bring the fulfillment and happiness of membership in God's collective to the Israelites and all humanity by helping us to better believe that we are, indeed, members of God's collective identity.

With that in mind, I would like to touch upon a relevant, yet often misunderstood, concept in the Bible: the fear of God. Some Christians think that fearing God means being afraid to transgress His commands lest He harm you as a result. We can immediately dispel that notion by referring back to the story of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, as described in the section titled "The Ten Commandments." Remember, the Israelites pleaded with Moses to be their intermediary with God because they were terribly afraid that they would die – metaphorically and physically – from hearing God's voice directly. God goes on to agree to this arrangement, but if God's desire is that people should be afraid of Him, why would he have agreed? If God wanted the Israelites to be afraid of Him, He could have simply continued speaking with them directly in His own voice, so the fact that God ceased doing so proves that He does not want us to be afraid of Him.

Other Christians would say that the "fear of God" refers to having reverence for God, which is correct, but the word "reverence" is so infrequently used in modern language that it really does not help us much in understanding the meaning of fearing God. I would argue that the best description of the fear of God is "admiration" of God. Admiration, to my mind at least, implies not just praise and respect but also a desire to be like the object of your admiration. You not only think the object of your admiration has good qualities but also that those qualities would be right and good *for you*. A member of a collective identity desperately wants the validation not just of the other collective members but, more specifically, of the very ideal model of that collective because such validation works peace of mind in the member that he is a genuine member of that collective. The "fear" that is in "admiration" is only the fear of disappointing the one whom you admire – the one who is the ideal model of the collective of which you consider yourself to be part. You so deeply love that

person, you want to emulate that person, and you want that person to validate your likeness to him. That validation is your most intense desire, so if you receive that validation, you achieve fulfillment. If you fail to receive that validation, you feel devastated. Thus, your most intense *fear* is disappointing the person you admire, not so much because of any punitive response from that person but, rather, primarily because that person would possibly cease to consider and validate you to be like him. This is the kind of relationship that a Near Eastern son has with his father, so the phrase "fear of God" would have been perfectly understandable to the Near Eastern audience of the Bible.

Of course, this analogy is not perfect because the difference between a man's relationship with God and his relationship with another human being is that no man can ever lose God's validation, for God knows that every man's true identity is permanently His perfect image and likeness. Nevertheless, the point is that our "fear of God" is to be our admiration of God resulting from our sincere belief that God is the substance of our true identity. In that belief, we know that God's will and wisdom for our lives is best for us, and we strive to live in accordance with His will and wisdom. While we are inherently pleasing to God because of our true identity in God, by behaving in accordance with God's commands, we can be better assured in our spirits that we are like God in our true identity and thus better assured that we are pleasing to God. By following the commands from God, we can more easily believe that God does validate us as being His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, and in that assurance, we feel fulfilled.

Why was the Law Needed?

At a summary level, the reason that the Law was needed is because of the existence of sin in the world, for the Law is meant to be a corrective action from God to lead humanity away from sin. However, this answer sidesteps the problem of timing. As already stated, the formal, written Law of God did not exist until the time of Moses. The existence of sin in the world, though, significantly predates the time of Moses, for sin entered the world in the time of Adam and Eve. If the Law of God is a corrective action for sin, why was it not composed immediately following the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden?

From one point of view, the Law of God does originate long before Moses because, as we discussed previously, the written Law of God effectively formally codifies the customs, traditions, psychology, and philosophy of ancient Near Eastern culture. This is the culture that does stem from Adam, Noah, Abraham, and the rest of the prominent Biblical figures that came before Moses. The real question, then, is why was the Law of God not formally codified *in writing* until the time of Moses?

To answer that question, we must review a bit of Israelite history. A common term in this history is “the Patriarchs,” which refers to three prominent characters in the Book of Genesis: Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac’s son Jacob. Jacob became the father of twelve sons, who would become the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. This group of people was composed of semi-nomadic Near Easterners who roamed within Canaan – which was the land that God promised to them and their descendants – until circumstances forced them to settle in Egypt. The sons of Jacob, and their families, dwelled in Egypt for at least one generation and probably longer. During that sojourn, Moses was born and came of age in Egypt, and he felt called by God to lead the Israelites out of oppressive conditions in Egypt and into the land of Canaan, which was still promised to them by God.

Moses likely discerned that the Israelites had become corrupted in spirit during their time in Egypt. This spiritual corruption was likely in the form of the Israelites being greatly tempted to disbelieve that they were God’s people – the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity. Why did they struggle with this temptation? Well, again, the Israelites’ conditions in Egypt had become overly burdensome, as they were required to perform labor that they found to be onerous, and the Egyptians treated them like second-class citizens. The Israelites were likely tempted to conclude that those grievous conditions meant that God had forsaken them. Nevertheless, the Israelites had stayed in Egypt for as long as they did, despite the problems, because there were certain pleasures associated with such residence, namely a variety of tasty foods and an abundance of water. To the modern Western audience, which lives in a time and place of plentiful food and water, those pleasures seem minor, but many Near Easterners, even today, live with access to limited and intermittent supplies of food and water.

Moses wanted to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land of Canaan. Motivating them to leave Egypt would be relatively easy because they were already resentful of the labor they had to perform in Egypt. However, motivating the Israelites to complete the journey, including any battles they would have to fight, would be the greater difficulty because the journey would be long and difficult, lacking the amenities of daily life in Egypt. Accordingly, Moses had to convince the Israelites that they were still God’s people and that God was still on their side. In other words, Moses had to convince the Israelites of their true identity in God, or in the language of the Near Eastern honor code, the Israelites had to be validated in their inherent honor as part of God’s collective identity. As we discussed previously, this goal is the exact purpose of the Law of God: a tool to express, maintain, and amplify our faith in God, particularly His declaration that we are permanently His perfect image and likeness in our true identity. The Law of God was codified in writing at this time – that is, the time of the Israelites’ journey to Canaan – precisely because the Israelites needed to be regularly reminded of and validated in their true identity in God. This would be achieved by them behaving in accordance with that true identity while they were journeying and when they came to settle in Canaan. Those behaviors are codified in the Law of God.

Indeed, the Law of God was codified in writing so that it would be a *permanent* reminder and validation to the Israelites because they needed to be *permanently* confident and assured that they were part of God's collective identity. Treating each other honorably, as members of the same collective identity in God, would not only help the Israelites to believe that God honored and loved them but would also foster unity among the Israelite people. When people treat each other honorably, they are willing to help and defend each other, but when people treat each other dishonorably, they develop strife among themselves. Internal strife in a group makes that group less able to defeat enemies and defend against future attacks. The Israelites needed to be a strong, united group if they were to successfully make the journey to Canaan, conquer it from its inhabitants, and defend it against future invasion. Indeed, many generations after the Israelites conquered Canaan, they did stray from the Law of God, and that is precisely when they began to be progressively attacked and defeated by external enemies, culminating in the Israelites' exile from Canaan.

Why was the Law not Enough?

One of the principles of Christian doctrine is that Jesus came to fulfill the Law of God, which implies that the Law was somehow insufficient. In what way was the Law insufficient? Well, it is not the Law of God that is flawed, but, rather, the Israelites' interpretation of the Law had become corrupted. Remember from the section titled "The Nature of the Law," the Law of God is an expression of the inherent honor that all human beings permanently have – our true identity in God – and the behaviors that the Law commands are meant to validate that true identity in us. The Law is not meant to be understood as a standard that we have to transform ourselves into in order to qualify for God's love, nor is it a standard that we must maintain and rigorously defend, as if it could be easily lost with the commission of any sin.

However, that is exactly the flawed perspective of the Law that the Israelites developed over thousands of years between the time of Moses and the time of Jesus, inclusive. Instead of the Law functioning as corrective action to lead people away from the deception that sin is part of our true identity and that we are not like God, it was functioning as a means of leading people to that very conclusion. We can discern that flawed conclusion in the "scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees." In the time and culture in which Jesus lived, these were the men who were considered by most Israelites to be experts in the Scriptures – recitation, interpretation, and application. These scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees were considered by the majority of the Israelites to be the exemplars and models of righteousness because they best knew, understood, and upheld their own teachings, which is to say that they scrupulously practiced the words and deeds that they believed to be righteous. When they met to debate with each other, their primary topics were the fine point of righteous behavior. Given

this narrow focus upon behavior by the very people that the Israelites believed to be the most righteous among them and, thus, those whom they believed had the highest favor of God, it is not hard to understand how the Israelites, particularly those with the least direct knowledge of the Scriptures, would come to the conclusion that behavior – words and deeds – *create* righteousness in the sight of God. Furthermore, it is easy to understand how those same Israelites would come to consider anybody who did not match the behavioral punctiliousness of the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees to be unrighteous in the sight of God. With this perspective in mind, the Law of God became, for the average Israelite, a tool of invalidation and deception instead of a tool of validation and truth. This was the spiritual condition of Israel when Jesus came.

Remember that in Near Eastern culture, a man is defined externally by the members of the collectives of which he considers himself to be a member or of which he desires to be a member. An Israelite was a member of the collective of God, so if the majority of the “people of God,” or, more to the point, one of the religious scholars – those considered to be experts on God – treated an Israelite as being dishonorable and sinful because he did not strictly and fully conform to the *popularly-accepted* standards of righteous behavior, then that opinion and treatment would carry the psychological and philosophical force, in the mind of that Israelite, of God, Himself, considering that Israelite to be dishonorable and sinful. This is especially true given the intrinsic ancient Israelite link between dishonor and sin [see the section titled “Honor and Dishonor”] and the Near Eastern belief in divine fatalism [see the section titled “Divine Fatalism”], by which an Israelite would deduce that both a man who was esteemed by popular opinion to be honorable and righteous and a man who was disdained as dishonorable and sinful were both in those respective conditions by the judgment and will of God. In other words, if the people of God treated a lowly man as being dishonorable because of his behavior, family history, living circumstances, etc., then that man would have been greatly tempted to consider himself to be sinful in the sight of God, and as that treatment continued, he would have been tempted to conclude that his sin and dishonor were part of his true identity. He would have been tempted to think that he was not one of God’s people according to God’s own judgment – that he was not the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity.

Dishonorable Treatment

How do we know that the prominent religious scholars and leaders of Jesus’ time treated the lowly people as being dishonorable and unrighteous? First, it is important to understand that this dishonorable treatment would not always take the form of direct ridicule. Indeed, it likely often took the form of simple avoidance of interaction – a kind of shunning – of those people considered to be significantly less honorable than oneself or totally devoid of honor. Additionally, those people considered to be dishonorable and unrighteous would know of that judgment placed upon them, and they would avoid interactions with the socially prominent in order to avoid possible

direct or indirect humiliation.^{cxxi,cxxii} Nevertheless, the Gospels do contain some examples of direct attempts to humiliate:

- **Mark 7:1-5:** In this passage, the Pharisees accuse the disciples of not following the traditions of the ancestors in that the disciples did not wash their hands before eating. The reference there is to Levitical cleanliness not microbial cleanliness.^{cxxiii,cxxiv,cxxv,cxxvi} In Biblical times and locations, water was not always readily and easily available, so travelers, like Jesus and His disciples, and poor people in general often did not have access to sufficient water to perform ritual washing before meals.
- **Matthew 12:1-2:** “*At that time, Jesus went on the Sabbath day through the grain fields. His disciples were hungry and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But the Pharisees, when they saw it, said to him, “Behold, your disciples do what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”*” No work was supposed to be performed on the Sabbath, but travelers, like Jesus and His disciples, and poor people in general often would not have had the means to store sufficient quantities of food prior to the Sabbath.
- **Matthew 9:10-11:** “*As he sat in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*” Similarly, in **Luke 15:2:** “*The Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, “This man [Jesus] welcomes sinners, and eats with them.”*” Not only do the Pharisees criticize Jesus and His disciples in these passages, but they also express a disdainful attitude toward the “tax collectors and sinners.”

Indeed, in Near Eastern culture in general, the people are very desirous of honor and prominence, which often comes only in distinction from those people considered to be and treated as being dishonorable and common. This method of obtaining or maintaining honor at the expense of another is why the Pharisees pose questions to Jesus to try to entrap Him,^{cxxvii} for if they can lead Him to give an unrighteous answer, then their honor is affirmed or increased while His honor decreases. They desire to gain or maintain prominence by humiliating Jesus in debate. Jesus is a poor, lowly man Who associates with other poor, lowly people, so the Pharisees try to make Him accord with their perspective of lowly people. In other words, they try to publicly prove that Jesus is dishonorable and unrighteous.

Jesus understood that righteousness comes only through faith in God, particularly the trust in God’s declaration that humanity’s true identity is God’s perfect image and likeness. Jesus further realized that the people’s misunderstanding of the Law was not promoting faith nor righteousness, and He sought to correct that spiritual corruption. That mission pervaded Jesus’ entire ministry, but it is especially noticeable in The Gospel of Matthew chapters five and six.

In Matthew chapter five, Jesus gives expression to how His audience, who are primarily the poor and least prestigious, are considered to be dishonorable and unrighteous by the religious scholars of the day because they do not fully comply with the cultural conventions of the day.^{cxxviii} In Matthew 5:3, Jesus alludes to His audience with the phrase, “*the poor in spirit.*” “Poor in spirit” means lacking self-esteem and a sense of one’s honor. It does refer to humility and lack of pride,^{cxxix} but we must remember that in Near Eastern culture, honor is prized and comes only through the esteem of other people. Thus, humility in this context refers not to a magnanimous modesty about one’s honor but, rather, one’s lack of honor due to an inability to acquire it or, more to the point, due to the refusal of other people to acknowledge and validate one’s honor. This kind of humility would be seen as weakness and dishonor. The people in Jesus’ audience have, or are greatly tempted to have, a spirit of dishonor and unrighteousness about themselves – a humility forced by circumstance – and, given that Near Eastern culture is one of externally-determined identity, that spirit is the result of how they are treated by those in society who are considered to be honorable, prominent, and righteous.

Jesus gives several examples of His audience’s humility forced by circumstance. For instance, in Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus speaks about taking oaths and making vows. He is referring to the Near Eastern custom of inserting oaths into one’s speech when making assertions of truth or promises. These oaths are often extreme statements, such as “if I do not do this thing I have promised, I will divorce my wife!” To the modern Western reader, such oaths seem ridiculous, but in Near Eastern culture, these statements are a means of conveying one’s sincerity. Furthermore, they are considered honorable oaths to take because they imply that the speaker is so sure of the truth of his assertion or his ability to do whatever he has promised – he is so sure of his own *strength* – that he is willing to take such an oath.

If, on the other hand, a man makes a promise but does not take such an oath, then people will interpret him as being insincere and weak, which implies dishonor. This situation is the one in which Jesus’ audience members often find themselves. They are poor and socially weak. They cannot afford to take such oaths because they may well find themselves in a position where they cannot fulfill a promise they made. Failing to fulfill the promise is bad enough, but if they had taken an oath, then it will be an even greater dishonor to not fulfill that oath. Thus, the poor often abstain from taking oaths altogether and endure the dishonor of being considered insincere and weak because they simply cannot afford to fulfill such extreme oaths. In keeping with the example above, they simply cannot afford to divorce their wives.

With each example of dishonor and unrighteousness that His audience endures, Jesus also cleverly provides an interpretation of the Law of God that actually shows these people to be practicing greater righteousness than even the Pharisees. In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus references the command of the Law of God that you should fulfill all your oaths to God, which in Near Eastern culture

includes *all* oaths because God is considered the “enforcer” of *all* oaths. They believe that God will punish a man for breaking an oath. Jesus makes the point that while the Pharisees take oaths and keep them, the people in Jesus’ audience go a step further in their righteousness and do not take any oaths at all, lest they incur the “wrath” of God for breaking an oath. Thus, Jesus cleverly validates behaviors that the poor already practice out of necessity. The Pharisees consider the poor, lowly people to be dishonorable and unrighteous for not taking oaths, but Jesus points out that they guard their righteousness all the more by not taking oaths at all.^{cxxx}

Of course, if given the chance, assuredly the Pharisees would dispute Jesus’ logic, but Jesus’ point in Matthew chapter five is not to make the practice of the Law of God the source of righteousness nor to rank people based upon their behavioral righteousness but, rather, to simply validate and honor the poor, lowly people in His audience. Jesus wants to “build them up” after they have been “torn down” for so long by popular opinion. He wants them to know that they are righteous in God’s sight, despite how anybody judges them, because they are the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity.

As Jesus puts it in Matthew 5:13-15: “*You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its flavor, with what will it be salted? It is then good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men. You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill can’t be hidden. Neither do you light a lamp and put it under a measuring basket, but on a stand; and it shines to all who are in the house.*” Jesus uses some Near Eastern idioms here. “Salt of the earth” means “best of the best.”^{cxxxii,cxxxiii} “Light of the world” means great honor, for light is a symbol of honor.^{cxxxiv} Because they are treated as being dishonorable and unrighteous by prominent people in society, the people in Jesus’ audience believe, or are greatly tempted to believe, that they are dishonorable – unrighteous – in God’s sight and thus unlike God in their true identity. Jesus is warning and encouraging them to not be deceived in that way. In other words, they are not to lose their “flavor” nor extinguish their “light” by putting it under a basket. Again, Jesus does not consider His audience members to be literally better than the rest of humanity. Rather, He is simply trying to validate them as being honorable and righteous in contrast to how they are treated by other people. They should not forget that all humanity is of the highest honor and righteousness in God’s judgment because all people are God’s perfect image and likeness in their true identity – the “best of the best” in all of God’s creative work. After all, like salt that has lost its flavor, a man who disbelieves his true identity in God is good for nothing, not because God deems him to be so but because the man deems himself to be so. Such a man condemns himself in that disbelief of his true identity in God.

Greater Righteousness

The poor, lowly people in Jesus' audience think, or are tempted to think, that God willed them into circumstances necessitating dishonorable behavior because God considers them to be fundamentally unrighteous and not like God. The truth, though, is that God willed them into those circumstances because He knows that they are fundamentally righteous in their true identity, as His perfect image and likeness, and He wants them to have a greater perception of that righteousness than can be gained from esteem and honor from other people.

As we already discussed, Jesus makes the point that the behaviors of the poor, lowly people, which they consider to be dishonorable because the prominent people in society treat them as being dishonorable, are actually more righteous in the sight of God. Jesus demonstrates this fact in Matthew 5, but the people in His audience will only be able to believe the righteousness of those deeds by having faith in God and, more to the point, in God's Son, Jesus. After all, the religious scholars of the day – the scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees – are not going to validate the righteousness of those deeds. The people in Jesus' audience have only faith in God as the means of justifying their self-perception that they are righteous – that they are the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity. It is faith in God's favor and love for them, despite their circumstances and the way that people treat them, that makes the righteousness of Jesus' audience greater than that of the Pharisees. "Greater righteousness" is being treated as the lowest and worst of people by others but still confidently believing that you are loved and honored by God because you are the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity. As Jesus puts it in Matthew 19:30, "*but many will be last who are first, and first who are last.*"

Recall that righteousness means being as you ought to be, which is near to God, even the perfect image and likeness of God. Thus, every human being has inherent righteousness because their unchangeable true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, and every human being *can have* righteousness of spirit if they sincerely believe in their true identity in God [see the section defining righteousness]. Both the people in Jesus' audience and the Pharisees have inherent righteousness, and they both have, or could have, spiritual righteousness, but the foundations of that spiritual righteousness differ. The Pharisees establish their spiritual righteousness upon what other people think of them and how other people treat them. The Pharisees only believe themselves to be righteous in the sight of God when and because they are treated as being the pinnacle of righteousness and piety by the majority of people in society. In order to accommodate this foundation for their sense of righteousness, the Pharisees want to be treated as being better in the sight of God and more favored by God than everybody else or even to the exclusion of some other people.^{cxxxiv} In the minds of the Pharisees, even if only on a subconscious level, they have a true identity in God only to the extent that people treat them as having that true identity over and above everybody else and even in distinction from some other people. This is why the prominent religious

scholars and leaders of the time treat so many people as being dishonorable and sinful and issue interpretations and applications of Scripture that are too burdensome for many people to bear.^{cxxxv} The religious scholars of the day need a “reliably sinful” group of people to which they can be contrasted by society, and the severity of their interpretations and applications of the Law of God ensure that there will be many people who fall short of “perfect” behavior. To the contrary, the people in Jesus’ audience have to base their spiritual righteousness only upon trust in God, specifically upon trust in God’s declaration of their true identity in Him. Despite the fact that the prominent people in society believe them to be dishonorable, the poor, lowly people have to choose to trust God that they are His beloved people too.

Faith in God yields the greater righteousness because God’s word does not change, and God’s Spirit does not change. God has proven Himself faithful, throughout all history, to His declaration that the Israelites, and all humanity, are His people – His perfect image and likeness in true identity. Contrariwise, people are fickle; their opinions can change drastically and quickly. Indeed, in Matthew 6, Jesus describes how the Pharisees go to great lengths to cultivate a positive public opinion of themselves because that public opinion is the entire foundation of their sense of personal righteousness. The downside, though, is that for the Pharisees, one mistake in their behavior, whether in a matter of written Law or of cultural custom, can jeopardize their public opinion and thus jeopardize their sense of personal righteousness. Additionally, the comparison of themselves to the poor, lowly people is of limited value to the Pharisees. After all, how valuable is it to you to be honored by, or in comparison to, those you consider to be dishonorable or less honorable than you? Thus, the Pharisees also want preeminent honor among their peers,^{cxxxvi} but only a few can have that distinction. Thus, because of the fickle nature of people’s opinions and the limited opportunities to be honored by those considered to be honorable, the Pharisees perpetually feel insecure in their sense of honor and righteousness.

Jesus commands His audience to have the greater righteousness that is founded upon a faith in that which cannot change – the esteem of God – versus that which can and does easily change – the esteem of people. Remember from the discussion of “God’s Kingdom” and the “Kingdom of Heaven” [see the section titled “What are the Benefits of Being a Christian”], faith in God is meant to lead you to a peace of mind in that faith, and peace of mind comes from trusting that which cannot change versus that which can change. Peace of mind comes from sincerely believing that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God based **solely** upon your trust in God’s declaration of that true identity and His unchanging belief in it.

Because the people in Jesus’ audience are held to be dishonorable by the prominent people in society, they have no temptation to regard themselves as being righteous because of public opinion. That is why their righteousness is the greater righteousness. That is why Jesus speaks in Matthew 5:1-12 about the lifestyle of the poor, lowly people being a blessing. These are the so-called

“Beatitudes” – statements beginning with “*blessed are...*” In other words, you are blessed by God when you have no distractions from a purely faith-based sense of personal righteousness, and this is a lesson that is still valid today. To follow Jesus’ rhetorical model in Matthew 5, I would add statements such as “blessed are you when you are poor, for you are not tempted to base your righteousness on wealth.” “Blessed are you when you make a mistake at work, for you are not tempted to base your righteousness on your job performance.” “Blessed are you when somebody breaks your heart because you then know to base your righteousness only on the judgment of God, Who will never break your heart.”

While the people in Jesus’ audience have no temptation to base their righteousness on public opinion, they do have constant temptation to base their sense of sinfulness upon public opinion. In other words, because prominent people in society treat them as being dishonorable, the poor, lowly people are tempted to believe that God must consider them to be unrighteous – sinful and unlike Him in their true identity. It is that temptation that Jesus seeks to fight. Matthew 5 is all about Jesus validating the people in His audience as being inherently righteous in the sight of God, and He does this to help them create, maintain, and strengthen a spirit of inherent righteousness about themselves – their belief in their true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God. This is all part of Jesus being the fulfillment of the Law of God because the Law is meant to be a tool of faith in God, particularly your faith that God made you permanently His perfect image and likeness in your true identity. The Law of God is meant to help you have faith in your inherent honor in the sight of God – faith in your inherent righteousness as God’s perfect image and likeness in your true identity. It is that faith that Jesus seeks to help people have. That is why Jesus says, “*Don’t think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn’t come to destroy, but to fulfill.*”^{cxxxvii} Jesus does not destroy the Law because the Law was originally designed for the same purpose as Jesus’ ministry: helping people to know and believe their true identity as the perfect image and likeness of God and all its wonderful implications.

Finally, one point that needs to be emphasized here is that despite the fact that greater righteousness comes in the form of faith in God, there is nothing unrighteous about desiring validation from other people that you are honorable and righteous, nor is it unrighteous to validate other people as being honorable and righteous. Indeed, such reciprocal and mutual validation is the mechanism and strategy of the Law of God. Remember, Jesus being the fulfillment of the Law of God simply means that Jesus does His best to validate all people as being righteous in the sight of God.

Validation from other people that you are honorable and righteous is meant to help you know and believe your righteousness in the sight of God. However, seeking and giving such validation is only righteous if you understand that the validation you give and receive is only validation of people’s true identity, as God’s perfect image and likeness, that is preexisting, natural, permanent, and common to all people because it was given to all people by God, Who permanently recognizes its accuracy. That understanding makes the validation from other people more trustworthy, assuring,

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and comforting because it validates a righteousness that is not ultimately based upon deeds or public opinion, that can both vary, but rather upon a true identity that cannot vary.

Chapter 6: Forgiveness

Definition

The definition of forgiveness is given best by Jesus in Mark 11:25, “*Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone.*” Lack of forgiveness means that you hold some offense against a person whereas the presence of forgiveness means that you do not hold that offense against him. In theory, this definition is easily accepted, but in practice, it creates difficult questions for us. For instance, if a person has a history of treating you badly, is it a lack of forgiveness for you to take that history into consideration in your future interactions with that person? In the same vein, is our entire criminal justice system a manifestation of a lack of forgiveness since we punish people who commit crimes?

We must understand what it means to not hold a sin against a person, and the best way to understand that meaning is to look to the example of God, Who has perfect forgiveness for all people. As we have already discussed, God, from the very beginning of time, has forgiven all the sins that every human being will ever commit. God is perfectly forgiving of our sins because He knows that sin is not part of our true identity in Him but is rather the product of deception worked upon us by Satan. Nevertheless, we have also discussed how God sends us corrective action in response to our sins for the purpose of leading us away from that sinful behavior and the deception of our spirits that motivates such behavior. Does the fact that God sends us corrective action, which is quite often unpleasant, mean that God does not forgive our sins? Of course not!

God does not hold our sins against us, but the “us” that He does not hold our sins against is our true identity, not our practiced identity. No matter how much we sin, God does not impute that sinfulness to our true nature, as His perfect image and likeness. God does not conclude from our sinful behavior that our true identity must have changed into sinfulness. However, God also knows that in order for us to have peace of mind and fulfillment in this life and to accept eternal unity with God in the next life, we must know and believe our true identity to be God’s perfect image and likeness. God knows that we must change our spirit unto that truth, and having so changed our spirit, we will change our behavior to righteousness rather than sin. In other words, God works corrective action in our lives because He wants our spirits and our practiced identity to match our true identity. Part of that changed spirit is knowing and believing that God does forgive all our sins because He knows that they are not part of our true identity.

Put another way, it would be accurate to say that while God does not hold your sins against your true identity – your soul – He does hold them against your spirit and your practiced identity, which manifests your spirit. This makes perfect sense because sin originates in your spirit and is manifested in your behavior. Please understand, I am not denying that God forgives all sins, but I simply want the reader to understand that God's forgiveness of sins means that God does not hold your sins against your true identity. Rather, God imputes your sins where they belong: your spirit and your behavior. Accordingly, God sends corrective action to your spirit and behavior but not to your true identity, for it never changes and thus never needs correction.

This is the example that we are meant to follow with each other. No matter how much or how severely a person sins, against you or God, you should never hold those sins against the person's true identity. You should never conclude that the person is sinful by nature nor that his true identity is different than yours, for to do so is to condemn that person in your mind. Such a conclusion will eventually lead you to doubt the permanence of your sinless true identity since you, too, commit sins.

Of course, vengeance, in the sense of corrective action, belongs only to God.^{cxxxviii} However, it is perfectly righteous for you to restrict your interactions with a person based upon the precedent of his past sinful behavior. Jesus speaks to this principle in Matthew 10:17, "*But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils, and in their synagogues they will scourge you,*" and Matthew 10:23, "*But when they persecute you in this city, flee into the next, for most certainly I tell you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man has come.*" Avoiding further harm is not the same as seeking vengeance for past harms. Jesus said "*whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also,*"^{cxxxix} but He did not say that you should continue to spend time with the person who hits you. This does not mean that you condemn the person's true identity, but, rather, that you are only protecting your own spirit from corruption resulting from interaction with a person who clearly has a corrupted spirit of his own. The person can certainly reform his behavior, and you should consider incrementally reintroducing him back into your life if he has demonstrated sincere change in his behavior, such that you feel you can trust him to not return to his old, sinful behavior.

Sincerely believing that a person is still the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity, despite the sins he has committed, **is forgiveness**. Of course, as we discussed in the section titled "Temptation vs. Righteousness and Sin," thoughts of righteousness are only temptations until you put them into sensory action. Thus, the thought of forgiveness only becomes real forgiveness when you behave according to it. However, the way in which you manifest that forgiveness in your behavior is at your prudent discretion for the protection of your own spirit, as described in the previous paragraph.

Repentance and Atonement

As Christians, when we talk about God's forgiveness of our sins, we inevitably have to also speak about repentance and atonement because both of those concepts must come before God's forgiveness is effective in our spirits. Traditionally, we would say that repentance comes first, then atonement, and then God's forgiveness is received. The Greek word which is translated as "repent" means "to change one's mind."^{cxl} Given that we have already discussed that sin is only the product of us being deceived by Satan, repentance is simply changing your mind from the deception that the sin is right and befitting of you to the truth that it is not so because your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, in which there is no sin. Some people would define repentance as being remorseful over the sin that you have committed,^{cxi} and that definition corresponds to the idea of changing your mind because if you are remorseful over your past behavior, then you must now realize that the behavior was not appropriate for you.

Traditional Christian doctrine maintains that after repenting of your sin, you must then do something to atone for your sin. This logic conceives of atonement as being a kind of compensation to the party you have hurt with your sin, whether it be God or another human being. I would argue that this is an illogical definition of atonement because, while in some instances we can make restitution for a sin we commit against another person, what could any human being ever do to compensate God for a sin against Him? God is the All-Powerful Creator of everything, so what could we do for Him or give to Him that He could not do or make for Himself? The better way to understand atonement is by using the most basic meaning of the Hebrew word which is translated as "make atonement," and that meaning is "to cover."^{cxlii}

The idea of covering your sin has its root in Near Eastern culture. As we have already discussed, a Near Eastern man defines himself externally by how other people in his community treat him, which manifests what they think of him. Given that external source of identity, it is not hard to understand that Near Easterners strive to conceal – or metaphorically "cover" – their sins and dishonorable behavior from public judgment of them by either hiding^{cxlvi} those sins from public discovery or by making excuses^{cxliv} for those sins if they are discovered by the public. The relevance of making excuses necessitates further explanation, which will be given in a moment. Even in those occasions when we can make restitution for a sin we commit against another person, that restitution does fit the idea of "covering" your sin because by making the restitution, the injured party is less likely to consider that sin in his perspective of you. The key point, though, is that atonement, from the Near Eastern perspective, typically takes the form of the sinner disavowing his sin, either by concealment or excuse.

As I wrote in the section titled “The Near Eastern Concept of Identity,” “part of what allows the Near Easterner to believe the reality of his ideal self, despite his behavior that is contrary to that ideal, is his psychology, which considers verbal expression – spoken or written – of the ideal to give that ideal a significant degree of reality.”^{cxlv,cxlvii,cxlviii} Additionally, the Near Eastern belief in divine fatalism, and fatalism in general, [see the section titled “Divine Fatalism”] provide another basis for making excuses because the Near Easterner believes himself to be subject to forces over which he has no control, including the will of God, the machinations of the devil, and earthly forces.^{cxdix} Thus, excuses that the modern Westerner may consider to be invalid, such as “I did not know” or “I could not help it,” are to the Near Easterner, perfectly valid because the excuse distances the man – his concept of his ideal self – from the act he committed which does not accord with that ideal self.^{cl} From a Near Eastern point of view, verbal repentance unto the truth gives psychological reality to the truth. In the case of Christian repentance, that truth is humanity’s true identity being God’s perfect image and likeness, in which there is no sin. Thus, from the Near Eastern perspective, verbal disavowal of your sin gives psychological, spiritual reality to the fact that your true identity has no sin in it or, put another way, that sin is not *true* of you.

From the Near Eastern and Biblical perspective, then, atonement is simply disavowing your sin – distancing and disassociating yourself from your sin. This idea of atonement can seem disingenuous and superficial to the Westerner, but remember that any sin you commit is not part of your true identity anyway. Thus, there is no reason for you to not disavow your sin since it is only the product of deception to begin with. Of course, we are still responsible for our behavior. We should seek to correct any harm we have done to others and sincerely commit to changing our behavior in the future, and those things would certainly qualify as acts of atonement because they express your belief that the sins you committed are not appropriate of you. However, your success or failure in rectifying those harms and changing your future behavior does not affect your true identity in God nor the validity of your atonement for the sin in question because atonement is really just a sensory manifestation – in word or deed – of a spirit of repentance. When you committed the sin, you had a spirit of deception that the sin was appropriate behavior for you because you were deceived into believing that you are not like God [see the section titled “The ‘Logic’ of Sin”]. In repentance, you now have changed your mind and have a spirit that the sin was not appropriate behavior for you because you now believe again that you are the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity. Having that spirit of repentance unto the truth, you then say or do something to disassociate yourself from the sin, or, put another way, you atone for your sin.

The Old Testament describes this topic of disavowing your sin in Numbers 15. The chapter makes a distinction between “unwitting” sin and “high-handed” sin. High-handed sins are those for which the accused does not express repentance. To the contrary, he is proud of his sin and thinks that it is appropriate and befitting of his true nature, so for this type of sin, he is not forgiven. He does not think that he has behaved contrary to his true nature, so he does not seek or accept forgiveness. This is why the sin is called “high-handed”: it creates the imagery of doing something wrong

without any attempt to conceal it, during or after the fact, as if done with a hand held high-up for all to see. The opposite is “unwitting” sin, for which the accused does express repentance. He acknowledges the fact that his sin is not appropriate to his true nature, so for this type of sin he seeks and receives forgiveness.

The distinction between the two types of sin and the idea of excuse-making are alluded to in the narrative of Numbers 15:32-36. A man is caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath day, when all Israelites are meant to be resting. The people bring the man to Moses and Aaron for judgment, and they put him in custody while they discern the appropriate course of action. Why the delay in pronouncing judgment when the command against work on the Sabbath day was clear? Because, Moses and Aaron were giving the man the time – the opportunity – to express repentance for his sin. They were waiting for the man to make some excuse for his sin to show that he disassociates himself – his true nature – from the sin. Keep in mind, the excuse does not have to be compelling or even credible. It could be as simple as “I did not know it was the Sabbath day.” Even if that statement is a lie, it would still qualify as atonement because it would still express the fact that the man now does not believe that his sin was appropriate behavior for him.

We see a direct example of repentant excuse-making in Exodus 32:24. After Moses asks Aaron why he made the golden calf idol, Aaron’s excuse is that he simply took a collection of gold from the people *“threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”* It is a ridiculous excuse, as if the gold just came out of the fire on its own formed into the shape of a calf, but the credibility of the excuse does not matter. Aaron’s disavowal of the sin is what matters because it expresses his belief that the sin was not befitting of his true nature. The disavowal expresses his spirit of repentance unto belief in his true identity in God, in which there is no sin.

Ultimately, just like the Law of God is a tool of faith, particularly our trust in God’s declaration that we are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity, atonement is a tool of repentance. Whether you are a Near Easterner living in a society where your identity is determined by other people’s opinions of you or you are a Westerner who has a very individualistic, self-determined sense of identity, atonement is sensory behavior meant to help **you** express and better believe your spirit of repentance that, despite the sins you have committed, your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. With that spirit, you can assuredly believe that God does forgive your sins because you know that He knows that sin is not part of your true identity. It is only yourself that you need to convince about your true identity in God; whether or not that persuasion comes through the intermediary of collective opinion is really beside the point. In effect, the ultimate “covering” that you are doing in atonement is concealing your sins from affecting your perspective or judgment of yourself. Most certainly though, you do not need to convince God of your true identity because He is the One Who gave it to you, and He never doubts it no matter how much you sin. Accordingly, even if you could, you do not need to hide your sins from God. God already forgives

those sins and, in effect, hides them from Himself. As God is recorded in Isaiah 43:25, “*I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake; and I will not remember your sins.*”

Finally, let’s bring this description of repentance and atonement back to the concept of forgiveness. Atonement is an expression of repentance, which is a change of your mind – your spirit – unto the belief that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, in which there is no sin. Within this repentance, is your acceptance of God’s forgiveness, for how can you believe that there is no sin in your true identity and not simultaneously believe that God forgives your sins? How can you believe that God holds sins against you that are not part of who and what you really are, as created by God? The entire purpose of repentance and atonement is to lead and convince you to believe and accept God’s preexisting and total forgiveness of every sin that you will ever commit.

God Provides the Means of Atonement

The Bible describes multiple means of atonement, which is really to say that God provides the means of atonement, and He does so because He wants us to know and believe that He does forgive us as a result of our true identity as His perfect image and likeness. We will talk about the means of atonement in a moment, but first I would like to point out that the very fact that God provides means of atonement indicates that God must already agree with the spirit that motivates that atonement. In other words, we atone for our sins because we have changed our minds – we have repented – unto the belief in our true identity in God. God would not have provided the means of atonement if He did not already and still, despite our sins, believe that true identity to be true. Furthermore, if God already knows and believes our true identity to be His perfect image and likeness, in which there is no sin, then God must already forgive our sins. After all, how could God hold sins against your true identity if He knows that they are not part of your true identity?

As for the means of atonement provided for in the Bible, the greatest means is Jesus, Himself, but we will discuss Jesus in a separate chapter. The primary means of atonement described in the Old Testament are sacrifices. The Law of God prescribes animal sacrifices to be made when a person commits a sin. The procedure for the ritual sacrifices highlights the nature of repentance expressed in the ritual. Before slaughtering the animal, the offeror – the man who sinned – laid his hand on the head of the animal.^{cii} “This meant transmission and delegation, and implied representation; so that it really pointed to the substitution of the sacrifice for the sacrificer.”^{ciii} By laying his hand on the animal to be sacrificed, the offeror was transmitting the sin he committed to the animal. The animal was then slain, its blood sprinkled upon the altar, and some or all of the animal’s parts were burnt upon the altar.

This sacrifice ritual contains important symbolism of repentance. After the man lays his hand upon the animal's head, the animal is now laden with sins that are not its own. The symbolic implication is that the sins are not part of the animal's nature; they are upon it but did not originate from it, so they cannot be intrinsically part of it. In other words, the animal bears sins that are not its own, just as you bear sins that are not the product of your true self but are rather the product of deception. Nevertheless, even bearing this sin, the animal is still acceptable upon God's altar, which implies that God does not hold the sins against the animal, just as God does not hold our sins against us. Ultimately, the greater symbolism in this ritual is that the offeror is meant to identify himself with the animal. Just as the sins upon the animal are not part of the animal's true nature, our sins are not part of our true identity. They are the product of the deception of our spirits by Satan. Our sins are upon us but not intrinsically part of us. Indeed, the fact that the ritual allows for the transmission of sins from the offeror to the animal means that the sins cannot be intrinsically part of us, for if they are, how could we transfer them to the animal? This concept of sin being with or upon you but not fundamentally part of you, and thus easily removed, is also expressed in the sacrament of Baptism [see the section titled "Baptism"].

Despite the fact that we commit sins, we, like the animal laden with sins, are still acceptable to God. The symbolism here is that God forgives our sins because He knows that they are not a part of who we truly are. Furthermore, a man making a sacrifice is understood by the other Israelites to be forgiven by God, and they treat him accordingly. That treatment only amplifies the man's belief in God's forgiveness of his sins. If people treat you like you are forgiven by God, then it is all the easier for you to believe that you are forgiven by God. Finally, this belief in our sinless true identity as God's perfect image and likeness, and the forgiveness of sins that it implies, *is* the repentance that the sacrifice ritual symbolizes, and that is why the ritual is a means of atonement.

However, as we will discuss later, Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, once for all sins, so animal sacrifices are no longer required [see the section titled "Death, Resurrection, and Ascension"]. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that God's total forgiveness of all sins is expressed and manifested not only in the New Testament but in the Old Testament as well.

Chapter 7: Jesus Christ

Name

The topic of Jesus Christ is, of course, enormous because He is the most prominent human figure in Christianity. I think the best way to begin this discussion is by examining His name. As we discussed previously [see the section titled “The Name of God”], the ancient Hebrew and Greek words for “name” include a person’s entire identity, but, for the moment, let’s focus upon just the appellation of Jesus – what He was called during His life on earth and what we call Him today.

To begin, the name “Jesus” is an English transliteration of a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name, which is itself transliterated into English as “Joshua.”^{cliii,cliv} “Jesus” is our Lord’s given first name.^{clv} “Christ” is not the last name or family name of Jesus, for ancient Near Easterners did not have surnames in the sense that we understand them in the modern, Western world. Typically, an ancient Near Eastern man would be given a first name, otherwise known as a forename, and that name would be sufficient to identify him within and among his immediate family. If he needed to be referred to in a wider social context, his father’s name would be added to the end of his first name. Thus, within Jesus’ immediate family, he would have been known as simply “Jesus,” but within the larger community, He would have been referred to as “Jesus, son of Joseph” because Joseph was His father. If further clarification was needed, additional lineage could be mentioned, such as “Jesus, son of Joseph, son of Jacob,” and so on. Alternatively, the name of a man’s home village or city could be added to his name to help differentiate him. Hence, Jesus could be referred to as “Jesus of Nazareth” since Nazareth was Jesus’ “hometown.”

The word “Christ” is a title given to Jesus by virtue of His ministerial role. “Christ” is an English transliteration of the Greek word, pronounced as “Christos,” which means “anointed” or “anointed one.”^{clvi} To be anointed refers to being chosen, and in the case of Jesus, it refers more specifically to Jesus being chosen or selected by God. Thus, the more precise rendering of “Jesus Christ” is “Jesus, *the* Christ.” Alternatively, we can refer to Jesus as “Jesus, *the* Messiah” because the word “Messiah” is an English transliteration of a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word that also means “anointed.”^{clvii} In short, the words “Christ” and “Messiah” mean the same thing.

Of course, the natural next question would be, if Jesus was anointed by God for a ministerial role, what is the nature of that role? What is the significance of Jesus as the Christ? The answer to those questions forms the substance of this entire chapter and, really, of this entire book. However, one

very important point we can make here is that Jesus did not go about in His ministry often proclaiming *Himself* to be the Christ or the Messiah, but His infrequent self-identification should not be interpreted as Jesus disbelieving His ministerial role.^{civiii} Rather, Jesus did not often self-identify as the Christ or Messiah simply because He was trying to lead others to identify Him as such.^{clix} Jesus wanted other people to discern that He was anointed by God because the entire purpose of Jesus' ministry was to help people have strong faith in God and the truth that God established from the very beginning – the truth which Jesus preached and manifested. Peace of mind comes from sincerely believing the truth from God to be true rather than from simply being told by someone else that it is true. Furthermore, as we will discuss in the section titled “Divinity,” direct statements by Jesus as to His role were sometimes vehemently rejected, so Jesus had to conduct His ministry in such a way that people would be led to discern His role on their own.

Finally, we often also refer to Jesus as “Lord and Savior.” While the divinity of Jesus is real, and we will discuss it later, the title of “Lord” for Jesus does not refer to His divinity. Rather, the word “Lord,” while it can refer to God, can also be used as a title of address to a man, in which it simply means “master.”^{cix} For Christians, Jesus is our Master in the sense that it is His teachings that we believe and follow in order to best know and believe the covenant truth. For the same reason, we refer to Jesus as our “Savior,” for we are saved from our corrupted understanding of ourselves by believing Jesus’ teachings. In Jesus’ words and example, we know and believe that sin is not part of our true identity, and in that way, we are saved from believing that we are condemned because of our sins. Most importantly, though, we must always remember that our ultimate Lord and Savior is Yahweh, God Almighty, but referring to Jesus as Lord and Savior does not contradict that distinction because it is the truth from God and established by God, from the very beginning of Creation, that Jesus preached and exemplified to us. Namely, the truth is that the true identity of humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God. This is why I, personally, often refer to Yahweh in prayer, etc. as “Yahweh *in Jesus’ name*,” for while Yahweh is God’s name, I know and have faith in Yahweh – namely that which Yahweh believes – through my knowledge of and faith in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Son of Man and Son of God

In the Gospels, Jesus refers to Himself as either “the Son of Man” or “the Son of God.” To understand the meaning of those titles, recall the Near Eastern concept of collective identity, in which a man considers himself to be a member of a collective of people, who all acknowledge some real or imagined person as the ideal model of what it means to be part of that collective. Furthermore, every member of that collective believes the ideal model to be the identity that is appropriate – or true – of him, and he strives to behave in accordance with that ideal model. Additionally, note that in the Near East, the word “son” does not just refer to the biological

relationship between a man and his male offspring. It also refers to a collective identity shared by the ideal model and the collective member.^{clxi}

A “son of man,” then, refers to somebody who is a member of the collective of men, and in ancient Near Eastern vocabulary, “men” can often be used to refer to all people, including men, women, and children.^{clxii} Thus, a “son of man” is a member of the collective composed of all people, or, put more simply, a “son of man” is a human being. Similarly, a “son of God” would refer to a person who is a member of the collective whose members all have the same true identity in God as the perfect image and likeness of God.

Notably, when Jesus refers to Himself with these titles, He uses the article “the.” Furthermore, even though the oldest manuscripts of the Gospels that we have, which are written in ancient Greek, do not differentiate between upper-case and lower-case letters, most English translations of the Bible will render Jesus’ titles with capital letters, namely “the Son of Man” and “the Son of God.” These are significant details because they express that Jesus, out of all the people in these collectives, is the best manifestation and representation of the truth about humanity and the truth about God. Jesus is not merely *a* son but, rather, *the* Son of Man and *the* Son of God. To be sure, God, Himself, is the ideal model of both the collective of man and the collective of God, for both are one and the same in true identity, but *among human beings*, Jesus is the best manifestation and representation of that shared true identity. Among human beings, Jesus is the ideal model of both of those collectives.

Another reason why Jesus called Himself “the” Son of Man and “the” Son of God is simply because, at the time, He was ***the only*** person who knew and sincerely believed the truth about humanity and God. This is also why Jesus refers to Himself as “*the only born Son of God*,” for He is referring to being “born of the Spirit” of God, which is a metaphor for believing the truth that God established about humanity – making God’s Spirit your own spirit. Thus, Jesus, at the time, was “the only born Son of God” in that He was the only person, at the time, who sincerely believed that truth.^{clxiii} Of course, “the only” is a bit of classic Near Eastern exaggeration and hyperbole because surely John the Baptist knew and believed the truth as well, but Jesus’ point is that He was one of the few people who knew and believed the truth. Even by the time of His death, resurrection, and ascension, the number of people who believed the truth was still a small part of the population. Furthermore, Jesus was probably the first person of His time to know and believe the truth, and John the Baptist was likely the first person to whom He communicated this belief.

This is not to say that Jesus was Messiah simply “by default” because He was the first person of His time willing to believe the truth about humanity and God. Most certainly, God did choose Jesus specifically for this role, but we also cannot underestimate the importance of Jesus’ boldness in

belief. A significant part of Jesus' qualification to be Messiah was that He was willing to boldly believe the truth that He discerned from God, and indeed such belief did necessitate boldness. We see throughout the Gospels how unpopular the truth, which Jesus preached and manifested, was to the prominent and powerful people in society. Additionally, Jesus was a lowly person in society, which as we discussed in the section titled "Honor and Dishonor," meant that He would have been regarded as dishonorable and unrighteous by prominent people. Jesus, like all the lowly people of the time, would have been born and raised in circumstances that instilled and inculcated humility into His character. It would have taken great boldness for Jesus to publicly minister and teach because it would bring Him into competition with the prominent, educated, and well-respected scribes, rabbis, and Pharisees. However, boldness and humility were attributes needed to be an effective Messiah. Boldness was needed to believe the truth, and humility was needed to preach and manifest that truth, which honors and validates all humanity – both those considered honorable and dishonorable in society.

Of course, if Jesus is the best manifestation and representation of the truth about humanity and God, then the natural next question is "what is the truth about humanity and God?" The truth is expressed in the very fact that Jesus calls Himself both the Son of Man and the Son of God because if He is both, then we can conclude that the Son of Man **is** the Son of God. More to the point, given the Near Eastern concept of collective identity, the implication is that *a* son of man must also then be *a* son of God. Since every human being is a son of man, and the ideal model of the collective of humanity – Jesus, the Son of Man – is also the ideal model of the collective of God – Jesus, the Son of God – then the logical implication is that every human being is *a* son of God as well. Is that a bold statement? Well, it is no bolder than the thesis statement of the entire Bible: Genesis 1:26-27, in which God proclaimed that man shall be made in His image and likeness without qualifications or exceptions. That statement **is** the truth about humanity and God. The true identity of humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God – children of God. God is the foundation of the very nature of humanity. This is the truth that Jesus came to preach to us or, more accurately, to remind us of. That is the ministerial role – the Messiahship – for which He was *anointed* by God. The Gospel truth is not a new creation but rather a reminder of what has always been true from the very beginning.

Additionally, we must realize that however attractive and comforting the loving words and deeds of Jesus were to His followers, what gave Jesus authority in their sight was the clear evidence that He was loved, blessed, and anointed by God. This clear evidence included Jesus' ability to work miracles, which were possible only by the power of God, Jesus' ability to defeat in debate the religious scholars of the day, and Jesus' resurrection by God. These were all signs that Jesus was definitely a genuine, "God-approved" Holy Man – that Jesus surely was the Son of God. The real comfort to Jesus' followers, then, was that this undeniable Holy Man and Son of God was clearly, visibly *a human being*, that He chose to emphasize His humanity by calling Himself the Son of Man, and that He chose to associate with even the lowliest people in society. In other words, Jesus

made it clear, from the very beginning of His ministry, that He identified with all people and that all people are meant to identify with Him. By implication, then, if all sons of man are meant to identify themselves with the Son of Man, Who is also undeniably the Son of God, then all sons of man must also be sons of God.

Significantly, the number of instances in the Gospels in which Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of God are much fewer than the number of instances in which He refers to Himself as the Son of Man. This discrepancy is the direct result of Jesus prioritizing the goal of leading people to identify themselves with Him and thus to *transitively and inferentially* identify themselves as sons of God as well. It was relatively easy to get people to identify Jesus with God because Jesus' miracles showed Him to be the Son of God, but the real hurdle was getting people to identify themselves with Jesus and thus with God. In fact, by proclaiming Himself to be the Son of Man and the Son of God, while also associating with all strata of people in society, Jesus was effectively establishing a collective identity in Himself, in which those who accepted membership in it would know themselves to be sons of man and sons of God themselves.

Is Jesus' perfect manifestation and representation of the truth about God and humanity restricted to just Jesus calling Himself the Son of God and the Son of Man? Of course not, for Jesus also manifested that truth in His teachings and behavior, as recorded in the Gospels. His parables demonstrate the truth and the need to believe it. Indeed, the efficacy of Jesus' ministry and Messiahship is that He did not simply call Himself by those titles but spoke and behaved in accordance with them. Namely, Jesus treated all people according to their true identity as God's perfect image and likeness. Put another way, Jesus treated every son of man as a son of God. Jesus declared forgiveness of sins because the truth about humanity is that sin is not part of our true identity, and the truth about God is that He forgives our sins for the same reason. Jesus spoke validation to the poor, lowly people because the truth about all people is that they are righteous in their true identity, and the truth about God is that He knows and believes that inherent righteousness in all people as well. Jesus ministered to the prostitutes, the disabled, and the tax-collectors because the truth about humanity is that our sins and circumstances in this life do not define us, and the truth about God is that God defines us as being His perfect image and likeness in our true identity. Jesus loved all people because the truth about all people is that they are worthy of love, and the truth about God is that God loves all people because He designed all people to be worthy of love by making us all His perfect image and likeness in our true identity.

To be sure, Jesus was very critical of the Pharisees, but His criticism of them was that their pursuit of righteousness through public opinion, generated by their conspicuously pious behavior, did not result in any comforting and assured sense of righteousness. Furthermore, their example led others to the same corruption. We see this criticism exemplified in Matthew 23:14, in which Jesus says "*But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut up the Kingdom of Heaven*

against men; for you don't enter in yourselves, neither do you allow those who are entering in to enter." The hypocrisy of which Jesus accuses them is that they claim to pursue righteousness but do it in a way that yields only a shallow and transitory variety. In short, the righteousness which the Pharisees gained was not *genuine* righteousness because they sourced it from variable public opinion rather than from the unchanging judgment of God. Genuine righteousness is to know that you are permanently as *God*, not the public, wants you to be because you are permanently God's perfect image and likeness in your true identity.

However, Matthew 23:14 shows that no matter how much Jesus was angered by the Pharisees' perspective and methods, He knew that they, too, were victims of deception. They pursued a peaceful righteousness that they would never find so long as they sought it in public opinion. This is why Jesus says in reference to the scribes and Pharisees, "woe to you" not "curses upon you." Ultimately, these people were objects of pity rather than contempt, for they were victims of their own deceived spirits just as much as those who followed them.

Daniel 7:13-14

"I saw in the night visions, and behold, there came with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man, and he came even to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. Dominion was given him, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away, and his kingdom one that will not be destroyed."

Some people might argue that the term "Son of Man" is simply a reference to Daniel 7:13-14, which describes the prophet Daniel having a dream or vision of the future Messiah, and that the term refers only to the future Messiah with no additional meaning related to the rest of humanity. While I agree that the passage refers to the future Messiah, it does not make the term "son of man" a *unique* description for the future Messiah. Remember, as I wrote in the previous section, "son of man" is simply a Near Eastern expression that means "human being." All that Daniel is saying in this passage is that the Messiah he saw in his dream or vision looked like a human being.

The reason he makes this observation and the reason he only says that the future Messiah was "like" a son of man, was because just prior to seeing the Messiah, Daniel saw four ferocious beasts that were unlike anything in creation, such as a leopard with the wings of a bird.^{cixiv} These sights were so fantastic that Daniel could not be sure of what he was seeing, so when he saw the Messiah in the form of a man, he was not willing to definitively identify Him as a human being. Instead, Daniel refers to Him as being "like" a son of man – like a human being.

Intercessor

As Christians, we say that Jesus is our intercessor with God. This statement is really just another way of referencing the fact that Jesus perfectly manifests and represents the truth about God and humanity or, put another way, that Jesus is the Son of God and the Son of Man. The distance or “conflict” between God and man is only man’s deceived perspective of himself that he is not like God in his true identity, a perspective that is also known as a sinful spirit. To be clear, this deception is only ever in the spirit of man, for God has a permanent perspective of humanity that we are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity. Jesus intercedes, which is to say that Jesus reconciles God and man, not by changing anything of God’s perspective but, rather, only by leading man to change his perspective unto the truth that his true identity is permanently the perfect image and likeness of God and that God does love him as a result.

Divinity

One of the principle tenets of Christian doctrine is that Jesus is God, but that statement causes much confusion and controversy because as modern, Western people we tend to think in terms of individuality and abstraction. When we hear the statement that “Jesus is God,” we are inclined to think that Jesus is God, alone – the single embodiment of the totality of Yahweh. This causes a logical problem for us because if Jesus was born in the first century A.D. Who was the God of the Old Testament? How could God exist from the beginning of time if Jesus was not born yet? Western Christianity creates many complex explanations to try to answer these questions, but the reality is much simpler.

As we have seen by studying Near Eastern culture, Jesus is the Son of God in the sense that He is a member of the collective identity of God, just like every other human being, and every human being has the true identity that is the perfect image and likeness of God. All human beings are “sons of God,” and Jesus is “the Son of God” simply because He did the best job, among all us human beings, of manifesting that collective identity in His words and deeds.

Thus, is Jesus God? Yes, because Jesus is part of the collective identity of God, but that divinity is just as true of every human being because every human being has the same true identity as Jesus: the perfect image and likeness of God. **All human beings are part of the collective identity of God, so it is perfectly righteous to say that all human beings are God just as much as Jesus is God.** This statement would anger many modern, Western Christians because they are tempted to think that it means that every human being is a god in and of himself and independent from Yahweh. This is not the meaning; the meaning is simply the collective identity stated in Genesis

1:26-27 within the context of the Near Eastern cultural understanding of identity as being collective and externally-determined. That passage establishes that humanity's true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, so if we are independent of Yahweh, then we have no true identity. From the Near Eastern perspective, you cannot be the perfect image and likeness of someone and simultaneously consider yourself to be totally independent from that person, for that person is the substance of your identity. Such independence would imply the conceptual separation of form and substance, which is foreign to Hebrew philosophy [see the section titled "The Original Covenant"]. In the Near Eastern concept of identity, the collective cannot exist simultaneously with a belief by its members that they are independent from the collective's ideal model, or to put it another way, the Israelites would never have considered themselves "the people of God" if they also thought themselves to be independent from God.

Interestingly enough, Jesus encountered people during His time on earth who also bristled at the concept of a man being God in the sense of collective identity in God. In fact, some of the Jews desired to assault and kill Jesus over His expression of this concept.

John 5:18:

For this cause therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath, but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

John 10:33:

The Jews answered him, "We don't stone you for a good work, but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God."

Furthermore, I would argue that just as Jesus is the Son of God and every human being is a son of God, so too is Jesus **the** Messiah or **the** Christ and every human being is **a** messiah or **a** christ. Remember, the words "messiah" and "christ" mean "anointed" [see the section about Jesus titled "Name"], and every human being, as the perfect image and likeness of God in true identity, is anointed by God to spread His truth and do His will. How do we know this is true? Again, we only need to look to the words of Jesus. Matthew 28:19-20:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you. Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

Yes, Jesus said these words to the eleven remaining Apostles, but who were the Apostles other than simply people who chose to believe the teachings of Jesus Christ? As Jesus believed and expressed the truth, so too should you, as a believer in that truth, express it as a fellow son of man and son of God. You may not express it as well and as consistently as Jesus did, but every little bit helps in leading other people to know and believe that truth as well.

Fulfillment of the Law

Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law of God. Righteousness is the state of being as we ought to be, and God declares that the way we ought to be is His perfect image and likeness. That is not just how we ought to be but is also the way that God made us. God gave us a permanent, true identity of being as we ought to be. The Law of God is full of ordinances that command people to treat each other according to that true identity. The more that we validate that true identity in each other, the easier it is for us all to believe that true identity to be accurate of us. Thus, the purpose of the Law of God is to be a tool of helping us to have faith in God, particularly faith in His declaration and judgment that we are permanently His perfect image and likeness in our true identity. That faith yields righteousness because it is a faith in the fact that our true identity is as God declares we *ought to be*: His perfect image and likeness.

Hence, righteousness is *expressed* in obedience to the Law of God, but righteousness *does not come* from such obedience but, rather, only from belief – faith – that our true identity is God’s perfect image and likeness. The problem faced by many of the Jews of Jesus’ time was that they had reversed the order. For them, righteousness came through performing righteous deeds of the Law in the sight of the public, such that people would see a man’s good deeds and reckon him to be righteous, pious, and faithful.

Jesus spent His time validating the *inherent and permanent* righteousness in all people so that they would be better able to have faith that God believed them to be righteous. Jesus’ ability to work miracles made Him undeniably the Son of God in the minds of those who believed in those miracles. Thus, when Jesus healed, forgave, and/or validated the righteousness of those people who believed Him to be the Son of God, the effect was that they believed, or more easily believed, themselves to be righteous in the judgment of God. Put another way, Jesus helped them to have the faith that God considers them to be righteous *despite* their deeds and circumstances. Furthermore, when Jesus encountered people who had that faith in God’s judgment of them as being righteous, Jesus validated that faith. For example, in Luke, chapter 7, Jesus acknowledges God’s forgiveness of the sins of a woman who is portrayed as being popularly considered to be dishonorable and unrighteous, and He says to her, “*Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.*”^{clxv}

In short, the purpose of the Law of God is to help people express, maintain, and amplify their faith in God, particularly their faith in God's declaration and judgment regarding their inherent and permanent righteousness, which is their true identity as God's perfect image and likeness. Jesus spent His time helping people to have that faith by validating their inherent and permanent righteousness and by validating such faith when He encountered it in people. Thus, Jesus fulfilled the Law of God in the sense of effectuating its purpose.^{clexvi}

Gentiles

Notably, Jesus spent the vast majority of His time on Earth ministering to the Jews, with relatively few interactions with Gentiles. Indeed, in Matthew 15:24, Jesus says to a Gentile woman, "*I wasn't sent to anyone but the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" However, that statement of exclusivity is countered by Jesus' commentary upon the great faith expressed by a Centurion, who was surely a Gentile. Matthew 8:10-11 states "*When Jesus heard it, he marveled and said to those who followed, "Most certainly I tell you, I haven't found so great a faith, not even in Israel. I tell you that many will come from the east and the west, and will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven."*" Additionally, in John 8:12, Jesus says "*I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life.*" Jesus called Himself the light of the **world** not just of the Jews, and light is a symbol of honor.^{clexvii} Thus, the honor of all people in the world is their true identity in God that Jesus manifests and represents. Furthermore, in Jesus' Great Commission to the Apostles, He says, "*Go and make disciples of all nations.*"^{clexviii} Finally, and most significantly, Jesus called Himself the Son of God and the Son of **Man**, not the Son of God and the Son of Israel or Abraham. Thus, Jesus must have believed that all people, not just the Jews, are sons of God – the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity. Clearly then, we can conclude that Jesus acknowledged and desired that Gentiles would have the salvation of Christian faith as well as the Jews. Of course, this extension of salvation to the Gentiles also perfectly complies with the covenant between Yahweh and humanity, as we discussed in the section titled "The Original Covenant."

Nevertheless, we are still left with the question of why Jesus mostly restricted His ministerial efforts to the Jews. Jesus focused upon ministry to the Jews because they had been the people of God for thousands of years. God does not forget His people, so Jesus wanted to lead the Jews back to the kind of faith in God that yields lasting, comforting righteousness based not upon their deeds but upon their true identity as God's perfect image and likeness. Additionally, and more to the point regarding the Gentiles, the Jews were meant to be a motivating example to the Gentiles to lead them to that same faith in Yahweh as well. We see this plan expressed in Genesis 12:3, in which God says to Abraham, "*All the families of the earth will be blessed through you.*"

However, in their state at the time of Jesus, many of the Jews did not feel the peace of mind about their righteousness that faith in Yahweh should yield. Many Jews felt dishonorable and unrighteous because other, more prominent Jews treated them that way based upon their deeds and circumstances in life. Such a group of people – both those who believed themselves to be unrighteous and those who treated them as being unrighteous – would not be a good example to the Gentiles. They would not be a good testimony for the honorable, righteous true identity of all humanity and the love that Yahweh has for all humanity as a result. Indeed, if the long-standing people of God did not all feel honorable and righteous and validate each other accordingly, they would not be much of a testimony about God’s validation of people, for clearly their faith in God had not inspired them to validate each other. Thus, Jesus focused His ministry upon the Jews in order to correct these conditions so that the Jews could have that peace of mind about their righteousness through faith in Yahweh and so that they could be a motivating example to the Gentiles to lead them to the same. Certainly, if the majority of the Jews had believed in Jesus and the truth He preached and manifested, their belief would have been a very convincing testimony to persuade the Gentiles to have Christian faith themselves. After all, if the Jews, who had been the people of God for thousands of years, judged Jesus to be an accurate representative of God, who among the Gentiles could doubt Jesus to be such an accurate representative?

Of course, as we know, even by the time of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, many Jews still rejected the truth Jesus preached and manifested. However, there were enough Jews who did believe it, and they formed the nucleus of the original evangelization team that would spread the Christian truth to the rest of the Jews and the Gentiles. Notably, though, Jesus’ attempt to persuade the majority of the Jews *first* was proven to be wise by the Apostle Paul. In Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, he dedicates a large section^{clxix} to explaining why and how so many Jews rejected the Christian truth. Indeed, he was obliged to provide this explanation to justify the value of Christian faith to the Gentiles in the audience of his letter. It is easy to imagine that the fact that so many Jews rejected the Christian truth was an embarrassment and headwind to any preacher of the Christian truth. After all, if the Christian truth about Yahweh and humanity was not “good enough” for all the Jews, who had been the people of God for thousands of years, why would the Gentiles consider it “good enough” either? If Jesus was not convincing to the majority of the Jews, who as a people had known Yahweh for thousands of years, why would the Gentiles find Jesus convincing when they would be seeking Yahweh for the first time? This is exactly the kind of “public relations problem” that Jesus was trying to prevent with His ministerial focus upon the Jews.

Praise God, though, for the Christian truth cannot be silenced, defeated, or eliminated by any earthly effort. Despite all attempts to oppose it, Christian evangelization and proselytization successfully continued and continues. As the Apostle Paul, wrote, “*for I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from God’s love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”^{clxx}

Sins

One of the principles of traditional Christian doctrine is that Jesus never committed any sins. Of course, as we have already discussed, the true identity of all humanity is sinless because our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, and that true identity belonged to Jesus as well. Thus, in His true identity, Jesus certainly had no sin, but the supposition in traditional Christian doctrine is that Jesus' behavior during the entirety of His life on earth did not contain even one instance of sin. I would argue that this supposition is erroneous and not supported by the Bible. Furthermore, I would argue that this supposition can be a detriment to a Christian's ability to know and believe his true identity in God, for the supposition portrays Jesus, the best human model of our **common** true identity, as being distinct from, indeed better than, the rest of humanity. However, the record of Jesus' words and deeds, when considered within the context of Near Eastern rhetoric, never describes Him as indicating that He believed Himself to be better than anyone else. To the contrary, Jesus made every effort to validate all people with the goal that all people would identify themselves with Him and His teachings.

I am not discounting the fact that Jesus behaved very righteously, for He did. Notably, Near Easterners make great use of hyperbole in their speech and writing to emphasize the point they wish to make. Thus, it is entirely likely that the Gospels highlight Jesus' righteous deeds, without giving equal attention to any sins He committed, simply as a form of implicit hyperbole to emphasize the point that Jesus was a very righteously behaved man. And, that righteous behavior is part of Him being the Son of Man because He showed in His very righteous behavior that the true identity of man is righteous, not sinful. As God is righteous, it is also befitting of the Son of God to behave righteously, and since Jesus is the Son of Man also, the implication is that all sons of man are righteous by nature as well and should behave righteously as well.

Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous to ignore the fact that there is no direct statement in the Gospels, by Jesus or anyone else, that Jesus never committed a sinful act in the course of His life. Given that the complete absence of sin in the life of any man would be quite remarkable, it seems to be a glaring omission for this absence to not be directly stated in the Gospels if, in fact, it is true that Jesus never committed any sinful act.

There are possible examples of sin by Jesus recorded in the Gospels. In Luke 2:41-52, Jesus, as a twelve-year-old boy, has presumably disobeyed His parents by remaining behind in the Temple after they had left Jerusalem. In John 2:13-17, Jesus is recorded as behaving with intense anger in the Temple, presumably with some damage to property resulting. Also, and I think very significant, in Matthew 15:21-28, Jesus initially refuses to help the woman who asked Him to help her daughter. That incident is most noteworthy because it ends with Jesus changing His mind and helping the

woman's daughter. One could argue that, upon realizing the extent of the woman's faith, Jesus repented of His previous refusal to help. Finally, I would argue that Jesus' insistence upon being baptized by John the Baptist expresses and implies Jesus' awareness of His own sinful behavior. John objects, "*I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?*" In response, Jesus tells John, "*allow it now, for this is the fitting way for us to fulfill all righteousness.*"^{clxxi} By "all righteousness," I believe that Jesus meant that baptism would be His expression of repentance unto the righteous truth just as it should be for everyone who is baptized [see the section titled "Baptism"]. Thus, I believe it to be evident that while John the Baptist clearly believes Jesus to be very, perhaps even perfectly, righteous in behavior, Jesus does not agree.

Of course, you could make arguments that justify Jesus' behavior in all those instances, such that the behavior was not sinful and that His baptism was for a different purpose, but if you are being honest with yourself, you have to consider which assertion stretches credulity more: Jesus never having committed any sin or Jesus being an overall very righteous man that did, nevertheless, commit some sins in the course of His life.

To be fair, there are a handful of passages in the New Testament, outside the Gospels, that can be interpreted, albeit erroneously, to indicate that Jesus never committed any sins. I will explain two examples.

1. **1 Peter 2:19-24:** *For it is commendable if someone endures pain, suffering unjustly, because of conscience toward God. For what glory is it if, when you sin, you patiently endure beating? But if when you do well, you patiently endure suffering, this is commendable with God. For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving you an example, that you should follow his steps, who didn't sin, "neither was deceit found in his mouth." When he was cursed, he didn't curse back. When he suffered, he didn't threaten, but committed himself to him who judges righteously. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds.*

This seems like a very direct statement that Jesus never committed *any sin*, but if you look at the surrounding context, about people suffering unjustly, I would argue that the author's meaning here is restricted to Jesus' lack of sin concerning His crucifixion. Namely, Jesus did not commit the sin for which He was crucified, hence the reference to Jesus "on the tree." In other words, Jesus was unjustly crucified because He preached and manifested a message that some powerful people did not want to accept, but His message was the truth, not blasphemy nor *deceit* – not sin. Jesus "bore our sins in his body on the tree" in the sense that His crucifixion was an attempted refutation, by His accusers, of the truth that He preached and manifested that humanity has no sin in our true identity because we are all sons of God in our true identity. Furthermore, despite the injustice, pain, and humiliation of

His crucifixion, Jesus did not retaliate by stating or implying that anybody was any less the perfect image and likeness of God in true identity than He is. In other words, Jesus committed no sin to warrant crucifixion, nor did He sin in retaliation for His crucifixion.

2. **2 Corinthians 5:21:** *For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf [...]*

The use of the words “knew no sin” is purposeful. The phrase is not referring to a record of Jesus’ behavior but, rather, to Jesus’ knowledge and belief that sin was not part of His, nor the rest of humanity’s, true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness.

Finally, we must remember that in the Near Eastern culture of Jesus’ time and place, where people’s identities were externally-determined by their fellow community members, whether or not a man was a sinner was a matter of perspective. To be sure, the “religious scholars” of the day, such as the Pharisees, definitely considered Jesus to be a sinner, probably the worst sinner imaginable. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, He was portrayed as the very worst of sinners in that He was suffering a punishment meant to inflict intense pain, unto death, and intense and widespread public humiliation, which for a Near Easterner would be just as fearsome as the physical pain. Thus, to the Near Eastern observers of Jesus’ death and the Near Eastern audience of the Gospels, Jesus went to His death as an undeniable sinner simply because that was the obvious prevailing opinion of Jesus in the wider Jewish community at the time of His death. Whether or not you believe that Jesus ever committed any sinful acts during His life, this externally-determined identity placed upon Jesus by many in the community that He was the worst of sinners is nevertheless ultimately the important point to remember because it is important in understanding Jesus’ subsequent victory over sin, which we will discuss in the section titled “Death, Resurrection, and Ascension.”

Death, Resurrection, and Ascension

Jesus was crucified, died, was resurrected, and finally ascended to Heaven, and in that sequence of events is the ultimate vindication and victory for Jesus, for the truth that He preached and manifested, and for all those who believe in Him as Messiah, Lord, Savior, the Son of Man, and the Son of God. This victory is the victory over sin; it is the vindication of Jesus and all humanity, in which it is proven that sin is not part of our true identity.

Whether you believe that Jesus did or did not commit any sins during the course of His life, what is not in dispute is that Jesus was considered to be the worst of sinners by many Jews, including many of the prominent religious scholars of the day. As we have discussed previously, in Near Eastern

culture, a man's identity is virtually entirely determined externally by other people in his community, particularly the people considered to be most honorable in that community. A man's perception of himself and the community's perception of him are based upon whatever people say about him and however people treat him. Thus, because Jesus was considered by many, including the prominent men, to be the worst of sinners, to the Near Eastern audience of the Gospels, the impression they would have received is that Jesus was, indeed, the worst of sinners. That is, they would have gotten that impression up to and including the point in the story where Jesus died.

What caused this perception that Jesus was the worst of sinners? Consider this except from Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, as found in Luke 22:66-71:

As soon as it was day, the assembly of the elders of the people were gathered together, both chief priests and scribes, and they led him away into their council, saying, "If you are the Christ, tell us."

But he said to them, "If I tell you, you won't believe, and if I ask, you will in no way answer me or let me go. From now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."

They all said, "Are you then the Son of God?"

He said to them, "You say it, because I am."

They said, "Why do we need any more witness? For we ourselves have heard from his own mouth!"

The religious men in power vehemently opposed Jesus' claim that He was the Son of God, for, they reasoned, He was only a man. Jesus emphasized the approval by God of the substance of His ministry by saying that "the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." However, by using the phrase "the Son of Man will be seated..." rather than just "I will be seated...", Jesus implied God's approval of **all** humanity and, thus, **all** humanity's nearness and likeness to God in the sight of God. Jesus created the imagery of a king with his son, the prince, seated next to him. By implication, a prince has the approval and support of his father, the king, and the king considers his son to be his image and likeness – part of the king's collective identity. All of this glorification of humanity, to the level of God and as having a Godly nature, absolutely infuriated the religious leaders of the day.

A similar statement of opposition is found in John 10:33: *The Jews answered him, "We don't stone you for a good work, but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God."* The religious "experts" of the day considered it blasphemy that a mere man could be *the* Son of God, so by extension, they considered it blasphemy that any man could be considered *a* son of God. However, the very word of God in Genesis 1:26-27 makes it clear that every human being is a child of God since God makes us all in His perfect image and likeness. Thus, the religious "experts" of the day, whether they realized the implication of their statements or not, effectively considered to be blasphemy the very concept that the true identity of humanity is of the nature of God and, thus, by

definition, *sinless*, for as God has no sin in Him, there cannot be any sin in His perfect image and likeness.

Did the religious scholars of Jesus' time dispute the fact that humanity was made in the image and likeness of God? Most likely, no, for they certainly would not have disputed the accuracy of Scripture, as recorded in Genesis 1:26-27. Nevertheless, the explicit and implicit reference to humanity's true identity and nature being Godly certainly offended them. The reasoning behind their resistance is not directly stated, but I would argue that they likely believed that humanity's nature changed upon the introduction of sin. I would argue that they believed the true identity of humanity **to no longer be** the perfect image and likeness of God because that true identity now contained sinfulness, resulting from sinful behavior. If that was indeed their belief, then they would have interpreted compliance with the Law of God to be a means of trying to *regain* that identity that God originally gave humanity – a means of *transforming* oneself back into that identity. Again, this reasoning is not directly stated in the Bible and may well have been only instinctive and subconscious in the minds of Jesus' opponents, but what other explanation could there be for the vehement resistance that the religious leaders and scholars had for Jesus? They could not dispute the fact that Jesus and His disciples had performed miracles, so they certainly exercised the power of God and thus had the approval of God.^{clxxii} Thus, those sons of man were *undeniably* sons of God in that respect, so the religious leaders' resistance to Jesus must have been based not upon His works but upon His teachings.

The only way in which the religious leaders and scholars of the day could have believed the accuracy of Genesis 1:26-27 and simultaneously declared it blasphemy for Jesus to call Himself the Son of God or, by implication, for any man to call himself a son of God, is if those leaders and scholars believed that humanity no longer had that true identity. Undeniably, the Pharisees' regular performance of righteous deeds in the sight and knowledge of the public, in order that the public would consider them to be preeminently righteous, contradicts any notion of the *intrinsic* righteousness of a person. Additionally, belief that compliance with the Law of God transformed a man back into his original true identity from God would explain the Pharisees' focus upon such compliance. By this reasoning, the public's esteem for the Pharisees' strict obedience to the Law of God would justify the Pharisees' belief that they had *regained* righteousness in true identity in distinction from many others who did not regain it. To the Pharisees' minds, the "dishonorable and unrighteous" masses, who behaved in ways that the Pharisees deemed to be dishonorable and unrighteous, were proof that humanity had lost its original true identity as God's perfect image and likeness. Furthermore, the Pharisees' public reputation for scrupulously righteous behavior was proof that they, alone, had regained that original true identity.

Some might argue that the Pharisees opposed Jesus and His validation of all humanity simply because they wanted to maintain their prestige in the community. While I would agree that they did

have that desire, we must remember that their prestige was ultimately based upon the belief, by the Pharisees and the majority of the Israelite community, that righteous behavior yielded righteousness in the sight of God, and that belief can only have been based upon the erroneous conclusion that humanity had lost the inherent righteousness – the true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness – that it previously had in the sight of God.

Some might object that if the Pharisees sought righteousness in the sight of God, then it was illogical for them to oppose Jesus, Who validated the inherent righteousness of all humanity. That’s correct! The Pharisees were deceived by Satan about the truth, and deceptions are illogical because they are based upon lies. The religious leaders of the day, and indeed most of the Israelites of the day, were under a terrible deception about the true identity of humanity. This deception had to be stopped, and that was Jesus’ anointed mission as Messiah – to correct that terrible deception and restore people’s knowledge and belief in their true identity in God.

With Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, the Near Eastern audience of the Gospels would have received a strong impression of the validity and accuracy of that true identity. The fact that God resurrected Jesus and subsequently invited Him into Heaven – Jesus’ ascension to Heaven – vindicates Jesus and the truth that He believed, preached, and practiced. Jesus’ resurrection and ascension is God’s testimony to the accuracy of that truth. In resurrecting Jesus and bringing Him to Heaven, God testified that humanity is, indeed and **still**, the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity. God testified that in our true identity, humanity assuredly does not have any sin. God testified that the Son of Man was truly the Son of God, and, thus, a son of man is truly a son of God. Jesus’ resurrection and ascension is the vindication not only that Jesus was not guilty of blasphemy but, more importantly, that the true identity of humanity, as stated in Genesis 1:26-27, is not blasphemy. It is the vindication that since there is no sin in God and our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, then sin cannot be part of the true identity of humanity. It is the victory and vindication for the inherent and intrinsic Godliness, righteousness, and sinlessness of all humanity. It is the victory and vindication of Jesus’ love and validation for all people, even the lowliest in society, because all people have the same true identity that is God’s perfect image and likeness.

This is why Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, once and for all. The animal sacrifices performed in the Temple were in response to sins as they occurred in the life of a man or the community. Yes, they conveyed the meaning of God’s forgiveness of sins, but they also inadvertently conveyed the meaning that more sacrifices would be needed for future sins. On the other hand, the sacrifice of Jesus was not about individual sins but, rather, the very nature of humanity – the question of whether our true identity does or does not contain sin. With Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, the answer came back crystal-clear and final: DOES NOT! No further sacrifice for sins is needed when you are confident that sin can never be part of your true identity. After all, if the true identity

of humanity is vindicated to be the perfect image and likeness of God, how can any sin be part of that true identity? This is why Jesus' death and resurrection is such a complete victory over sin, for Jesus' resurrection is not just God's validation that any one particular sin is not part of Jesus' true identity but, rather, that no sin is part of the true identity of any human being! All humanity, in our true identity, and despite the sins we commit, is equally and perfectly righteous in the sight of God!

A key point, though, in the death and resurrection story of Jesus is that we must remain strong in the belief that sin is not part of our true identity, for only by believing in that true identity can we accept eternal life with God. When Jesus was suffering on the cross, He refused to believe that the truth he manifested in His ministry was actually false. Despite the externally-determined definition of Him by so many prominent religious men, Jesus refused to believe that He was guilty of blasphemy. He stayed faithful to the word of God about the true nature of humanity.

We see this faith in Jesus' words on the cross, in Matthew 27:46, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" Of course, God did not forsake Jesus, as we come to realize once Jesus is resurrected, but, in the moment of Jesus hanging on the cross, it surely would have seemed that God did forsake Him. In such an extreme state of humiliation and shame, any Near Easterner would have been extremely tempted to believe that he must be a terrible sinner, for, he would reason, his crucifixion is the community and God testifying to that sinfulness. Thus, Jesus would have been very tempted to believe that He was a sinner and that what He preached was sin. However, Jesus did not say "My God, my God, you have forsaken me!" Instead, Jesus *asked* "**why** have you forsaken me?" That "**why**" is incredibly significant because it implies that Jesus did not agree that His suffering and shame was warranted by His ministry. Jesus did not accept that the truth He believed, preached, and manifested was false. Jesus stayed firm in belief that sin is not part of the true identity of humanity and that all humanity is righteous in the sight of God by virtue of our true identity in Him.

That confident belief is what allowed God to resurrect Jesus and allowed Jesus to ascend into Heaven. Remember, God's judgment of all humanity was fixed permanently in Genesis 1:26-27, in which God declares that our true identity is His perfect image and likeness. Accordingly, God knows that sin is not part of our true identity and invites us into eternal perfect unity with Him. The variable that remains is whether or not we agree with God about our true identity. In order to have eternal life with God – our resurrection and ascension to Heaven – we must follow Jesus' example and sincerely believe that sin is not part of our true identity because our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. We must follow Jesus' example and believe that a son of man is a son of God. Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension are validation of the accuracy and efficacy of that belief, for that belief – that faith in God's word as best manifested by Jesus – yields eternal life with God. The resurrection and ascension to eternal life with God that God offers to all humanity was

accepted by Jesus in and with His sincere belief in the truth about Himself, and it can be accepted by every one of us in and with the same belief in the truth about ourselves.

Let's return for a moment to 2 Corinthians 5:21, "*For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" Jesus was executed for preaching a true nature of all humanity that the religious scholars of the day considered to be sinful. Thus, Jesus' "sin" was not just one action but rather a manifested perception of the true identity of all humanity that His accusers claimed to be sinful. In other words, what was really "on trial" was the very nature of humanity. Hence, Jesus being "made to be sin" is simply a piece of Near Eastern hyperbole to express the fact that Jesus was portrayed, in crucifixion, as a terrible sinner for His belief in and communication of the inherently righteous true identity of all humanity. He was portrayed as such a terrible sinner that it was *as if He were sin itself*. But, it was Jesus, not His accusers, Whom God vindicated in resurrection rather than letting Jesus pass from memory in disgrace or have a legacy of disgrace. In Jesus' resurrection, His perception about Himself and humanity – the perception that His accusers deemed to be sin – was validated by God to be perfectly righteous. With Jesus' resurrection, God testified that sin is not part of the true identity of humanity.

We should see in Jesus' life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension that fundamental righteousness of all humanity. Or, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "*so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" "The righteousness of God" refers to what we "ought to be" as designed by God [see "Chapter 4: Righteousness and Sin"]. Namely, in faith in Jesus Christ, we can best know and believe that our *righteousness* – what we ought to be – is *of God*. In other words, in Christian faith, we can best know and believe that our permanent true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, in which there is no sin. God allowed Jesus – Who knew, believed, preached, and manifested the sinless true identity of all humanity – to be portrayed as the height of sinfulness precisely so that God could vindicate that true identity through Jesus' resurrection. That vindication makes it all the easier for us to confidently believe that true identity to be ours. Indeed, consider the words of 2 Corinthians 5:18-19:

But all things are of God, who reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ, and gave to us the ministry of reconciliation; namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their trespasses, and having committed to us the word of reconciliation.

God was reconciling the world to Himself in Jesus Christ, "**not reckoning to them their trespasses.**" That is another way of saying that God knows that sin is not part of the true identity of humanity, and God knows that because He gave us the permanent true identity that is His perfect image and likeness.

The Only Way to The Father

Faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as the Son of Man and the Son of God, and as Messiah is the only way for a person to have eternal life with God. As Jesus says in John 14:6, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.*" "Life," in this context, means honor. For the Near Easterner, life and honor are one and the same because honor is the prerequisite of meaningful existence [see the section titled "Honor and Dishonor"]. The justification for the words of John 14:6 is that in faith in Jesus Christ, we *best* believe our true identity as God's perfect image and likeness. That true identity is our fundamental, inherent, and intrinsic honor – our *life*. This is not to say that our true identity is not expressed elsewhere, for it is found in the Old Testament, particularly in Genesis 1:26-27. However, it is through faith in Jesus Christ that we are best able to reject the deception from Satan that we are sinful by nature and thus not like God and instead believe the truth that we are like God in our true identity, in which there is no sin. Jesus was a man condemned to the most shameful of deaths because he was considered to be the worst of sinners for preaching a true identity of humanity that many prominent religious "scholars" considered to be blasphemy, yet God vindicated Jesus and the true identity of humanity by resurrecting Jesus and bringing Him to Heaven. Jesus is the only way to the Father because there is no clearer nor more authoritative validation than His experience – of life, death, resurrection, and ascension – that the true identity of humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God, in which there is no sin. Hence, only faith in Jesus Christ yields to a person victory over sin.

Jesus' resurrection and ascension validate that, in the sight of God, the only real and significant identity of humanity is our true identity in God. Jesus is a vindication of the ideal collective identity of humanity as the perfect image and likeness of God, and this vindication was very meaningful to Near Easterners because they were very familiar with the concept of a man's ideal identity versus his practiced identity, as we discussed in the section titled "The Near Eastern Concept of Identity." Remember, Near Easterners not only believe in collective identity, with an ideal, but also in externally-determined identity. A Near Easterner considers himself to be that which other people think of him, as expressed in what they say about him and the manner in which they treat him. In the Jesus story, Jesus, through His resurrection and ascension, is effectively declared by God, the Highest Authority, to be the perfect image and likeness of God – the Son of God – in His true identity. Since Jesus was also the best human manifestation of the truth about humanity – the Son of Man – this declaration from God about Jesus was effectively a declaration from God about all humanity as well. Namely, the Near Easterner would discern from the Jesus story that the real, true, and ideal identity of any man is the perfect image and likeness of God. Thus, the Jesus story is very convincing and comforting to Near Easterners, but the Gospel is meant to be spread to all people, including those with different philosophies and psychologies than the Near Easterners.

Much of the New Testament, after the Gospels, is meant to translate the very Near Eastern context of the Gospel message to the Greco-Roman philosophy and psychology, which are the foundation of modern, Western philosophy and psychology. Greco-Roman culture differed from Near Eastern culture, particularly in that it had a much greater sense of individuality. We see that individuality in the proliferation of many different philosophical schools of thought that a Greco-Roman man could choose from and apply to his life. Unlike for the Near Easterner, an externally-determined ideal identity of humanity, even when it was manifested in the miraculous life of Jesus, was not enough to convince the Greco-Roman man of the reality of that ideal. That ideal had to be proven by a logical argument in order to convince the Greco-Roman mind. This was especially true because the portrayal of Jesus as having very righteous behavior makes it easy to falsely conclude that God resurrected Jesus only because of Jesus' righteous behavior. That conclusion is no comfort to any man who reflects upon his own life and has only his record of deeds upon which to judge himself, for every man's life proliferates with sin.^{clxxiii,clxxiv,clxxv}

The Apostle Paul addressed this very problem in Romans 7:15-25:

For I don't understand what I am doing. For I don't practice what I desire to do; but what I hate, that I do. But if what I don't desire, that I do, I consent to the law that it is good. So now it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing. For desire is present with me, but I don't find it doing that which is good. For the good which I desire, I don't do; but the evil which I don't desire, that I practice. But if what I don't desire, that I do, it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the law that, while I desire to do good, evil is present. For I delight in God's law after the inward person, but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me out of the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ, our Lord! So then with the mind, I myself serve God's law, but with the flesh, sin's law.

All Christians believe that the commands from God are good and righteous for us to follow, but, nevertheless, we all still sin. We are tempted to believe that the failure of our deeds to accord with our perception of what is good and righteous means that the goodness and righteousness, as we define it, are not part of who we really are. We are tempted to conclude that the goodness and righteousness that we desire to be true of ourselves is proven untrue of us by our deeds that contradict that concept of goodness and righteousness.

Paul tells us in this passage to make a distinction between our sinful deeds and the goodness we perceive about ourselves – a distinction between our practiced identity and our true identity. A person naturally desires to do only things that he considers to be good. A person considers a thing – a statement, deed, thought, etc. – to be good when that thing is in accordance with his perception of

his true identity. Thus, if you desire to follow God's commands, then you must believe that the commands of God are good, and, thus, you must believe that those commands are befitting of and in accordance with your true identity. Moreover, if you believe the commands of God to be commands of righteousness, then you must believe that only righteousness, not sin, is part of your true identity. With this deductive logic in mind, you can conclude that it is not you – *the real you* – that commits the sins. Put another way, you can conclude that the sins are not the product of your true identity.

Rather, Paul says, it is the sin that dwells in you that commits sin. To be clear, Paul is not implying that your sins are outside of your control. He is simply trying to convey the meaning that sin may be in you and part of your life, but it is not part of who you really are. Paul's portrayal of sin as an entity distinct from your true self is akin to the concept that your sin is the product of your being deceived by Satan. As Paul describes in the passage, you don't understand what you are doing. You know the Law of God to be good and desire to follow it, yet, nevertheless, you often transgress it. What, then, would cause you to transgress God's Law? The only answer can be that you are deceived, even if just for the moment, into believing that your true identity is not the perfect image and likeness of God. In that moment, you are deceived into thinking that sin is in accordance with your true identity because, in that moment, you have a deceived understanding of your true identity. According to Paul's metaphor, a sin is a discrete manifestation of a deception from Satan worked upon you. You should no more conclude that sin is part of your true identity than you would conclude that a tumor is part of your natural bodily condition. Tumors can cause terrible effects upon your body, but those effects do not define your natural bodily condition. Similarly, sin can certainly wreak havoc in your life and the lives of those around you, but sin does not define your true identity.

What justifies us making the distinction between our deeds and our true identity? Jesus Christ! As Paul writes in Romans 8:1: "*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*" The phrase, which is translated as "walk according to," has the figurative meaning here of having a sincere, effective spirit or perspective.^{clxxvi} Namely, if you have faith in Jesus Christ, then you have the Holy Spirit as your own spirit, which is to say that you believe – you "walk according to" the perspective – that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, as proven by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. With that perspective in mind, you can be assured of your salvation and your ability to accept eternal life with God. Remember, the "blasphemy" that Jesus was condemned for was His insistence upon the Godliness, righteousness, and sinlessness of the true identity of all humanity. For you of Christian faith, then, sin holds no condemnation because you firmly believe that sin is not part of your true identity. You firmly believe your true identity to be the perfect image and likeness of God, in Whom there is no sin. Contrariwise, only the man who "walks according to the flesh" has condemnation. "Walking according to the flesh" refers to having the perspective that your true identity is the sum total of your deeds, particularly your sins. The

man with that perspective believes that he is condemned because he believes that his sins are part of his true identity. He cannot believe that he is like God in his true identity since God does not have sin as part of Himself. Accordingly, that man cannot accept eternal life with God because he does not think that he qualifies for it.

For those of us who tend to define ourselves by our deeds, the resurrection of Jesus Christ can be cold comfort because we are tempted to conclude that God resurrected Jesus simply because Jesus was *falsely* accused of being a blasphemer. To us, Jesus' *reputation* of being a blasphemer is irrelevant because He did not actually blaspheme, for the true identity of humanity is, indeed, the perfect image and likeness of God. Thus, Jesus' reputation as a blasphemer was false. Paul's point in the passage from Romans 7 – his attempt to make the resurrection of Jesus Christ comforting to us – is that while we focus so much on the fact that Jesus' resurrection vindicated Him personally as not having been a blasphemer, we forget that what was also vindicated was the truth that Jesus preached and manifested. Jesus was not a blasphemer *because* what He preached and manifested was not blasphemy. In Jesus' resurrection, God not only confirmed that Jesus did not commit blasphemy but also confirmed that the true identity of every human being is the perfect image and likeness of God and that, accordingly, sin is not part of the true identity of any human being. The vindication of that truth is why we can and should take the greatest comfort in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

Making the distinction between deeds and true identity may seem to some people to be disingenuous – putting one's “head in the sand.” However, the priceless glory of God's justice is that all humanity does have a permanent, sinless true identity as God's perfect image and likeness. It surely is good but not too good to be true, for it is declared and upheld by God, Himself. In order to have eternal life with God, you must believe that true identity to be yours so that you are in agreement with God about your true identity. Given all the deception that Satan ceaselessly works upon us regarding our true identity, the only way for us to sincerely know and believe the truth is in Christian faith. Put another way, we can only truly know God and ourselves through the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Is Sin Meaningless?

We have thoroughly discussed the point that the true identity of humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God and that, as a result, sin is not part of our true identity. We have learned how faith in Jesus Christ sets us free from condemnation in our sins. Having learned these things, some people might object that we make sin meaningless and thus make sins permissible. This is totally false. Remember the purpose of the Law of God: a tool to help us express, maintain, and amplify our faith in God – particularly God's declaration of our true identity in Him. The more you behave

in accordance with your true identity, the easier it is to stay strong in the belief in that true identity. Your sins do not change your true identity, but they surely do express, maintain, and amplify your weak or non-existent belief in that true identity. The more you behave righteously, the easier it is to keep believing that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God. The more you sin, the easier it is to keep being deceived that your true identity is not the perfect image and likeness of God.

As Paul writes in Romans 6:15-16, 23: “*What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Don’t you know that when you present yourselves as servants and obey someone, you are the servants of whomever you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness? [...] For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” Paul’s point is that the outcome of eternal life or eternal condemnation is entirely the product of what you believe about yourself, so you need to make it your top priority to regularly convince yourself of the truth about yourself that God established from the beginning. We will discuss these concepts more in the section titled “Judgment.”

Chapter 8: Sacraments

Overview

Sacraments are rituals that are meant to be expressions of repentance – a change of mind unto the truth about God and yourself. I will be describing two sacraments in particular: Baptism and Holy Communion. If a given ritual helps you to know and believe some aspect of Christian truth, then that ritual is a righteous act, but only you can discern whether that goal is being achieved in your practice of any ritual. Furthermore, just as the Law of God does not create righteousness in us but only reflects the inherent righteousness we already have by virtue of our true identity in God, the same is true of sacraments. You should only practice any sacrament because you have a *preeexisting* belief in – or spirit of – the truth about God and yourself and you desire to express, maintain, and amplify that belief by practicing the sacrament. Ultimately, sacraments have the same purpose as the Law of God. Indeed, the sacrifices that were practiced by the Israelites in the Temple are part of God’s Law, but they have the form of sacramental rituals. Also, as we discussed in the section titled “Repentance and Atonement,” atonement is a sensory manifestation of a spirit of repentance. Thus, sacraments also qualify as atonement.

Baptism

Baptism is the sacrament in which the participant is ritually cleansed with water. In the sacrament, you are meant to express your belief that your sins are forgiven by God because your sins are not part or befitting of your true identity in God. The nature of the ritual helps the participant to believe in that forgiveness all the more, as described below. In the written Law of God, ritual cleansing with water is only used as a means of removing Levitical uncleanness rather than removing sins. As you will recall from the section titled “Cleanness and Uncleanness,” Levitical uncleanness is the state in which you have a spirit of vulnerability, fear, and premature despair regarding some evil, dishonor, and/or calamity and in which other people have that same spirit about you. Uncleanness is thus similar to sin, in that it is a distraction from and deception about your strong, honorable true identity in God, but it differs from sin in that it is not the result of moral transgressions but, rather, of some unavoidable circumstances of practical life. Accordingly, while other people would certainly avoid contact with an unclean person, neither they nor the unclean person would attribute sin to the unclean person. At least in the Old Testament, Levitical uncleanness did not impute the same stigma of shame to a person that was imputed by sin.

Nevertheless, in the Gospels, ritual cleansing with water – that is, baptism – is also used as a means of knowing and believing – or accepting – forgiveness of sins.^{clxxvii} This choice of ritual is very important because it serves to equate, in a particular way, sin with Levitical uncleanness. To be sure, the meaning is not that sin, like Levitical uncleanness, is unavoidable nor that Levitical uncleanness is a state of sinfulness. However, by using a ritual reserved for removing Levitical uncleanness to express, maintain, and amplify belief in the forgiveness of sins, the effect was to remove the shame of sinfulness. The implication was that just as Levitical uncleanness should not be a source of shame and condemnation of your true identity, neither should sin be a source of shame and condemnation. In other words, this choice of ritual made the belief in forgiveness of sins that much easier. After all, belief in God’s forgiveness of all your sins should be easy because you should believe that sin is not part of your true identity. The nature of the ritual makes your repentance unto the truth all the easier. You repent unto the truth that sin is not part of your true identity, which is the perfect image and likeness of God, and that distinction between sin and your true identity is emphasized in the ritual that portrays sin as being as easily removed as Levitical uncleanness. Indeed, the sins are portrayed as simply being *washed off* of the person.

In fact, looked at from the other side, Levitical cleanliness is a wonderful metaphor for the effect of repentance. Levitical cleanliness is simply the absence of Levitical uncleanness because cleanliness is our natural, default condition. Similarly, righteousness is our natural, default condition because of our permanent true identity as God’s perfect image and likeness. Thus, the removal of sin from your perception of yourself – your repentance unto the truth – is really to restore your perception of yourself to your natural, default condition.

Mark 16:16

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who disbelieves will be condemned.

This verse has caused much confusion and misunderstanding among Christians because it seems to state that undergoing the ritual of baptism is required for salvation. Many people deduce from this verse that if a person dies without having been baptized, then he will be condemned no matter what is the state of his Christian faith. This conclusion is unequivocally untrue, for it contradicts the very concept of salvation by faith alone. To wit, in John 4, Jesus comments upon the divergent beliefs, between Samaritans and Jews, as to the proper place to worship God. Jesus says, in part, “*But the hour comes, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such to be his worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*”^{clxxviii} Worship of God, nearness to God, and salvation unto eternal life with God are matters not of buildings and rituals but of having a spirit of belief in the truth about God and

yourself. Having that spirit – having the Holy Spirit – is how God is best known, or, as Jesus put it, figuratively with classic Near Eastern hyperbole, “God **is** spirit.”

Why then did Jesus make the statement recorded in Mark 16:16? If salvation is a matter only of spirit, why did Jesus not simply say “He who believes will be saved; but he who disbelieves will be condemned?” You must remember the audience to whom Jesus was speaking: His remaining eleven apostles, whom He was sending out to preach the Good News to all people. Jesus’ point is that in order to be saved, people need to believe the truth about God and humanity, **such that they sincerely believe that their sins are forgiven by God.** That sincere belief in God’s forgiveness of your sins is salvation. The ritual of baptism, as described in the previous section, makes it easier for the participant to believe that his sins are forgiven, but nevertheless, it is only the confident belief in the covenant truth that yields salvation, not the ritual itself.

We make the mistake of interpreting this verse as Jesus emphasizing the ritual of baptism as a requirement superseding “mere” faith. The reality is quite the opposite. Jesus is *de-emphasizing* the baptism ritual by stating clearly that a spirit of belief in the truth is necessary for salvation. That is also why Jesus does not say “he who disbelieves *and is not baptized* will be condemned.” He simply states that “he who disbelieves will be condemned” precisely because it is only a man’s belief in the truth, or lack thereof, that can yield salvation or condemnation, respectively, regardless of whether or not the man undergoes the ritual of baptism.

Why does Jesus need to make this point? Because, His apostles will be going out to evangelize, and it will be much easier to get people to undergo a ritual than it will be to lead them to sincere faith in the truth. Jesus is making it clear that the apostles cannot simply administer the baptism ritual while neglecting that goal of creating faith in people. Indeed, the Bible provides examples of just the kind of “empty ritual” that Jesus is warning against. In Matthew 3:7-10, John the Baptist chastises the Pharisees and Sadducees for coming to him to be baptized because they did not come with a sincere spirit of repentance unto the truth. Additionally, in The Acts of the Apostles 19:1-7, Paul encounters people who were baptized “*into John’s baptism*” but had not received the Holy Spirit and had never “*even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.*” That is exactly the kind of situation that Jesus warns against in Mark 16:16.

The Holy Trinity

In what Christians call “The Great Commission,” Jesus commanded His Apostles to “*go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you.*”^{cxxxix} That concept of “the Father,

Son, and Holy Spirit” is what many Christians call “The Holy Trinity,” and many obscure theories have been proposed over the last two thousand years to explain that concept. However, the meaning of that phrase is really not difficult to understand when you take into account the foregoing content of this book.

As we discussed in the section titled “The Name of God,” in the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages, the concept of a person’s name did not just refer to his appellation but also to his entire identity. Also, in this section on baptism, we discussed how the ritual of baptism is meant to express your belief that God forgives your sins and help you believe that fact all the more. Of course, as I have described in this whole book, the reason why God forgives your sins is because your true identity is His perfect image and likeness, in which there is no sin. Ultimately, then, the ritual of baptism is not just an expression of belief in forgiveness of sins but also belief in the entirety of the truth that God has established, which justifies that forgiveness. Thus, we could paraphrase the Great Commission as “Go and make disciples of all nations, leading them to believe the truth in the identity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit [...]”

The Father is Yahweh, God Almighty, and the Son is Jesus Christ, Who, as we have previously discussed, is the best human representation and manifestation of the true identity of all humanity and God’s belief in that true identity as well. Jesus showed us that all humanity – sons of man – are the perfect image and likeness of God – sons of God in our true identity [see the section titled “Son of Man and Son of God”]. The Holy Spirit, as we discussed in the section titled “God is Spirit,” is simply the perspective of God and what God believes.

Putting this all together, the Great Commission, and its mention of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, makes perfect sense. Jesus knew that all humanity has the true identity that is God’s perfect image and likeness. Thus, Jesus commanded His disciples to go to all people, Jews and Gentiles, and make them disciples – students and believers^{clxxx} – of the truth regarding the identity of Yahweh, Whom the Gentiles would not already have known, and the identity of His Son Jesus Christ, Whom most people, Jews and Gentiles, would not have already known. Indeed, Jesus commanded the disciples to make all people students and believers of the Holy Spirit – God’s knowledge and belief that all human beings are His perfect image and likeness in our true identity – and all the implications of that Holy Spirit, which we have discussed throughout this book. Put another way, Jesus commanded His apostles to educate people about Yahweh, Who is the Father, Jesus, Who is the Son of God and the representative of all humanity, and the Holy Spirit, which is the perspective or truth of the relationship between Yahweh and all humanity. Namely, that truth is that all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity.

Some people may object that the Holy Spirit must be more than simply the perspective of God because the Bible describes those who have the Holy Spirit as doing miraculous things. For instance, The Acts of The Apostles 2:4 states, “*they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak.*” It is undoubtedly a miracle to suddenly be able to speak a language that you did not previously know. The context of this verse is that Jesus had recently died, been resurrected, had returned to the disciples for a period of forty days, and had then ascended to Heaven. The content of Acts 2:4 means that the disciples had reinvigorated their belief in Jesus’ teachings despite the fact that He was no longer with them in bodily form. Believing Jesus’ teachings is to have the Holy Spirit as your own spirit – to be “*filled with the Holy Spirit.*” Additionally, the disciples not only sincerely believed the Christian truth but also felt compelled to spread it to other people, which is why they saw flaming tongues, heard the sound of a mighty wind, and were empowered to speak in foreign languages. Speaking the truth to other people is the theme of all of these events. However, where the verse states that “*the Spirit gave them the ability to speak*” those foreign languages, I would argue that the meaning is simply that God empowered the disciples to speak in those languages *because* they believed the truth that Jesus had communicated to them – because they were “*filled with the Holy Spirit.*” In other words, God’s empowerment of the disciples was not the product of random selection, for God gave them the ability to speak in foreign languages because their belief in His truth and desire to spread it to others would make them good stewards of that power.

When you believe the truth that God has established and that Jesus preached and manifested – that is, when you make the Holy Spirit your own spirit – God often empowers you to do amazing things because you and He are of one Spirit, and you seek to do His will according to His wisdom. Indeed, the most literal translation of the final phrase in Acts 2:4 is “*as the Spirit granted them to speak.*” The Greek word, which is translated in the World English Bible as “gave,” has more the character of permission here^{clxxxi} in the sense of divine fatalism – God’s permission and will. In other words, the phrase is simply indicating that it was God’s will – the desire of His Spirit – that the disciples were able to speak in foreign languages. Because this miracle occurs on the occasion of the disciples being “*filled with the Holy Spirit*” – being reinvigorated in belief in the Christian truth and the desire to spread it – the implication is that the disciples’ strong faith motivated God’s will, such that He performed this miracle. In summary, there is a correlation between having the Holy Spirit as your own spirit and being able to do amazing things, but it would be wrong to characterize the Holy Spirit as a supernatural force or entity that **directly** bestows supernatural power upon you. It is only ever God Who empowers you to do His works, and He will only so empower you when you have a mind – a spirit – to do His will.

Holy Communion

Holy Communion is the ritual in which Christians consume bread and wine with the understanding that the bread is symbolic of Jesus' body, and the wine is symbolic of Jesus' blood. The Biblical basis for this ritual comes from the Gospel descriptions of Jesus' last supper with His apostles. One such description is found in Luke 22:19-20:

He took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in memory of me." Likewise, he took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.

The purpose of this ritual is contained in the statement "do this in memory of me." At the most basic level, the purpose of this ritual is for us to remember Jesus Christ. The next question would be, what exactly are we meant to remember about Jesus? We are meant to remember the truth that He manifested to us – that the true identity of humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God and all of the implications of that true identity. In the passage, Jesus makes reference to his body being broken and his blood being poured out, and those references are allusions to His upcoming suffering in crucifixion. Given that we are meant to remember the truth that Jesus manifested to us, it makes perfect sense that He would most specifically want us to recall His death and resurrection because in those events, that truth is most clearly and miraculously manifested.

Jesus chooses the occasion of a meal for the apostles to remember Him and not only *a* meal but, by implication *every meal*. We can discern that Jesus intends for us to remember Him at every meal because in the passage, He refers to bread and wine, and in Roman Palestine, bread and wine would have been served at virtually every meal.^{cxxxii} We are meant to remember Jesus and the truth He manifested even as often as every meal we eat because Satan spends every moment of our waking lives trying to deceive us into disbelieving our true identity in God.

Why the reference to consuming Jesus' body and blood? Those statements are purely a metaphor for the participant believing that his true identity is manifested by Jesus' life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. According to the logic of the metaphor, you are to believe that the true identity that Jesus perfectly represented is "in" you just as much as you believe the bread and wine that you have eaten is "in" you. Hence, the consumption of the *symbolic* body and blood of Jesus Christ is a reminder of your true identity and an expression of your belief that you have that true identity. Such consumption is also a reminder of all the implications of your true identity and an expression of your belief in them. The most important implication is God's forgiveness of your sins. When Jesus said "do **this** in memory of me," it is the identification of ourselves with Him,

and the true identity of humanity that He preached and manifested, that is the “this” that we are meant to be doing in the Holy Communion ritual. You identify with Jesus in the sense that Jesus believed Himself to be the Son of Man and the Son of God, and, as a result of your belief in Jesus as such, you also believe that you are a son of man and a son of God yourself. Again, we must *regularly* remember that our true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God because Satan *regularly* tries to convince us otherwise.

Of course, some Christian denominations believe that the body and blood of Jesus are not symbolic in this ritual but literal. They believe that in some way, the literal body and blood of Jesus is contained in the bread and wine consumed in the sacrament. This belief seems to come from both a failure to recognize just how much figurative language is used by Near Eastern people and from the content of 1 Corinthians 11:29, where Paul writes, “*For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy way eats and drinks judgment to himself if he doesn’t discern the Lord’s body.*” The misunderstanding here comes from interpreting “the Lord’s body” to be a literal reference. Quite to the contrary, when we read the surrounding context of that verse, it becomes apparent that Paul uses the phrase “the Lord’s body” to refer to the shared true identity of all humanity that is perfectly manifested by Jesus.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul wrote about how some people in the Christian congregation at Corinth had formed exclusive groups, and those groups practiced discrimination against each other, including unequal distribution of food at their communal feasts, at which they practiced a form of Holy Communion. Such unequal distribution was a form of discrimination resulting from each group’s perception that the other groups were not like them – indeed, not as “good” as them. The groups did not believe that they were all equally represented by Jesus – they did not “discern the Lord’s body” as including everybody equally. Paul’s point is that if you do not believe that *all* humanity has the same true identity – as represented and manifested by Jesus – then you have completely missed the point of the Holy Communion ritual. To the extent that you do not believe *all* humanity to be the perfect image and likeness of God in true identity, you bring “judgment” or “condemnation” – an alternate translation of the Greek word that is translated in this passage as “judgment” – upon yourself.^{cxxxiii} If you are part of humanity, and you do not believe *all* humanity to have that same true identity, then you cannot be certain that you have it either. You thus cannot be certain that God forgives your sins. Satan will seize upon that doubt to lead you to feel condemned by God because of your sins.

Chapter 9: Prayer

We often think of prayer as being the means by which we communicate our needs to God for Him to fulfill, but such a perspective makes the mistake of assuming that God needs us to inform Him of our needs. As all-powerful, all-knowing God, Yahweh already knows what is best for us at all times, and because He loves us, He always gives us those things, according to His perfect will and wisdom. Thus, by definition, your prayers cannot cause God to give you things that He was not already planning to give you in the first place.

What then is the purpose of prayer, if not to communicate our needs to God? Prayer is meant to be a tool of faith in which you establish the mental connection between the things you pray for and God's provision of those things. The only reason that God gives us anything in this life is because He loves us *and wants us to be certain of that love*. In other words, God gives us the things that we need in this life so that we will attribute the actual provision of those things to the work of God, and, with such an attribution in mind, our faith in God will be strengthened. That strong faith in God will give you joy and peace of mind in your faith – a joy and peace of mind otherwise referred to in the Bible as entering “God’s Kingdom” or the “Kingdom of Heaven.”

Of course, that strategy only works if we do, indeed, attribute the provision to God, for if you instead attribute the provision to luck or your own efforts, then the good things that God gives you do nothing to maintain or improve your faith in God. Prayers of petition to receive some good thing or prayers of thanksgiving after having received some good thing both place your spirit in such a state that you commit to the conclusion that the good thing came only from God. This is why even though your prayers cannot change God’s perspective of what things are best for you, they can affect the timing of God’s provision of those things^{clxxxiv} because your prayer of petition is an expression of the state of your spirit, such that you know your request can only be fulfilled by God. If your request is in accordance with God’s will, then your right spirit will likely make God’s fulfillment of that request come sooner, or at the very least, your spirit will not give God additional reason to delay the fulfillment.

For the sake of creating that right spirit within you, it is important to pray, and your prayers should be sincere expressions of trust in God, which the Lord’s Prayer demonstrates in its simplicity, brevity, and lack of specificity.

The Lord's Prayer

Jesus created a prayer, which Christians refer to as “The Lord’s Prayer,” as an example of the kind of prayer that is effective for strengthening our faith in God unto the result of peace of mind in that faith. Just before describing this prayer, Jesus references the fact that God already knows what we need regardless of our petitions in prayer.

In praying, don't use vain repetitions as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their much speaking. Therefore don't be like them, for your Father knows what things you need before you ask him.^{cxxxv}

Thus, Jesus instructs His disciples in a simple prayer with relatively vague petitions because the point of the prayer is to help maintain and improve our faith in God rather than to request specific provisions from God. Accordingly, I think it is instructive to examine this prayer line-by-line. I have numbered the lines sequentially for easy reference.

- 1 “*Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy.*
- 2 *Let your Kingdom come.*
- 3 *Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*
- 4 *Give us today our daily bread.*
- 5 *Forgive us our debts,*
- 6 *as we also forgive our debtors.*
- 7 *Bring us not into temptation,*
- 8 *but deliver us from the evil one.*
- 9 *For yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Lines 1 and 2 establish the purpose of the prayer. Namely, the petitioner wishes to experience the spiritual joy and peace of mind that comes from sincere faith in God, which, again, Jesus often describes with the metaphor of entering the “Kingdom of Heaven” or “God’s Kingdom.” That joy and peace of mind are referred to in this prayer as the “Kingdom” coming, and that faith is referred to as keeping the name of God holy. In other words, the petitioner desires to have strong faith in God so that he will experience joy and peace of mind in that faith.

Lines 3-8 establish how it is the petitioner plans to strengthen his faith. Specifically, he plans to recognize the ways in which the will of God is executed upon earth as perfectly and powerfully as it is executed in Heaven (line 3). The petitioner will be on the lookout for God’s gracious work in his life, and he is committing to attributing that gracious work to God. The petitioner will recognize God’s grace in the satisfaction of his material needs, which are referred to with a broad

interpretation of “daily bread” (line 4). Furthermore, the petitioner will attribute to God the various times in his life in which he either avoids calamity all together or escapes from temporary hardship (lines 7-8). Notably, the terms “temptation” and “the evil one” are intended to refer to hardship of any kind.

Lines 5-6 require a bit more explanation. First, the use of the word “debt” seems odd on first read, but it is simply an allusion to the preceding statement of “give us today our daily bread.” Jesus’ point is that God shows His unfailing generosity to us in providing for our needs – “our daily bread” – but we fail to reciprocate that generosity with obedience to God’s commands. We instead disobey those commands; we sin. Thus, from the Near Eastern perspective of the importance of reciprocation, we have an outstanding “debt” of generosity to God. Nevertheless, God forgives us those sins we commit – those “debts” – and we can most easily believe in that forgiveness from God when we forgive the sins that other people commit against us. To be clear, the word “as,” in the original Greek, can also be translated as “when.”^{clxxxvii} Jesus uses the debt terminology in reference to the sins that other people commit against us simply to maintain the rhetorical style of the overall statement since style of phrasing contributes much to persuasive efficacy in the Near East [see the section titled “Where is all the Scripture?”]. In short, in lines 5-6, the petitioner is committing to discerning God’s forgiveness of his sins by himself forgiving the sins that other people commit against him.

For comparison, consider the parallel statement in the Lord’s Prayer as recorded in the Gospel of Luke: “*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.*”^{clxxxviii} In that context, the conjunction “for” is not causative but deductive. To paraphrase, “God, forgive us our sins, for **even we ourselves** forgive everyone who is indebted to us.”^{clxxxix,cxc} In other words, you can most easily believe God’s forgiveness of your sins when you forgive sins other people commit against you because, surely, God would be no less generous with forgiveness than would be human beings. Additionally, Jesus makes the point undeniably clear in Matthew 6:14-15, where He says “*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don’t forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*” Remember our discussion in the section titled “Externalization of Personal Perception.” The meaning in this passage is not that God ever *actually* withholds forgiveness of sins but, rather, only that a Near Eastern man who *believes* himself to be not forgiven by God conceptualizes that belief as God withholding forgiveness. Furthermore, Jesus is again making the point that it is harder to believe that God forgives your sins when you, yourself, do not forgive the sins of other people against you. But, when you do forgive other people’s sins against you, it is all the easier to believe that God forgives your sins. Put another way, the more frequently and sincerely that you do not attribute a man’s sins to his true identity, the easier it is for you to believe that God does not do so to anybody either.

Additionally, Jesus elsewhere expresses the same logic. For example, “*Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you.*”^{cxcii} In other words, practicing broad forgiveness of others will motivate them to practice broad forgiveness toward you, and both expressions of forgiveness will also make easier your belief in God’s total forgiveness of all sins.

Line 9 is a summary and conclusion for the prayer which restates the purpose for the prayer. It is God’s eternal Kingdom, Power, and Glory that we want to come to us in the sense of us having the spirit of trust – of faith – in God and the joy and peace of mind that comes from having such faith. This spiritual dwelling in the Kingdom of God is what we ultimately want, so Jesus ends the prayer with “Amen,” which means “so be it.”^{cxciii}

Chapter 10: Eschatology

Eschatology is “the part of theology [...] that deals with death or the end of the world.”^{cxxiii} Accordingly, this topic covers the next life both for the individual and the world as a whole. All the elements of Biblical eschatological descriptions could be interpreted literally, figuratively, or as a mixture of both. I am going to focus primarily upon the figurative interpretation for two reasons. First, Near Eastern writers and speakers use much figurative language to convey their meanings. Second, even if every aspect of Biblical eschatology is to be a literal, sensory occurrence, those aspects do still have a figurative, doctrinal meaning that we need to understand. One could write an entire book describing the eschatological content of the Bible, but the fundamental, figurative eschatological meaning of the Bible does not require a particularly lengthy exposition.

The best place to begin is with 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 because in it Paul provides a comparatively succinct eschatological statement:

But now Christ has been raised from the dead. He became the first fruit of those who are asleep. For since death came by man, the resurrection of the dead also came by man. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then those who are Christ's at his coming. Then the end comes, when he will deliver up the Kingdom to God the Father, when he will have abolished all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For, “He put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when he says, “All things are put in subjection”, it is evident that he is excepted who subjected all things to him. When all things have been subjected to him, then the Son will also himself be subjected to him who subjected all things to him, that God may be all in all.

The figurative meaning in this passage from 1 Corinthians is that faith in Jesus Christ will yield peace of mind in faith in God. Please understand that Paul uses some double meanings here. “Dead” refers both to bodily death and spiritual corruption – believing that humanity is sinful by nature and thus fundamentally unlike God. “Asleep” refers to the same spiritual corruption. “Made alive” refers both to bodily resurrection after death and to the spiritual awakening unto the belief in the truth that humanity’s true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, in which there is no sin. The coming of Christ is both a reference to Jesus’ bodily resurrection after death and to the belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ, belief which is best motivated by the fact that Jesus was literally resurrected by God.

With those meanings in mind, we can interpret the passage. Jesus was the first person – “*the first fruits*” – among His deceived generation – “*those who are asleep*” – to escape the deception and instead believe the covenant truth that humanity’s true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, in which there is no sin. The truth that Jesus believed, preached, and manifested has spread and will continue to spread to other people as those people come to believe in Jesus Christ – “*those who are Christ’s at His coming.*” In that Christian faith, the believer is metaphorically “*made alive*” in that he has a spirit of honor and righteousness about himself and feels validated by God because he knows that he is the perfect image and likeness of God in his true identity. This is not to say that all human beings who die will not be literally, physically resurrected, but, again, we are simply focusing on figurative meaning here.

The description of all things being in subjection to God refers to the victory and vindication of the covenant truth. All enemies of the covenant truth – “*all rule and all authority and power*” – will be rendered meaningless in the minds of those who have Christian faith – those enemies will be “*abolished.*”^{cxciv} For in that faith, Christians will believe that the only One Who defines them is God, and they will know that God permanently defines them as His perfect image and likeness in their true identity. Even death will be meaningless to them because in their Christian faith, they are emboldened and empowered to believe in and accept eternal life with God. This strong faith in the teachings of Jesus Christ will thus yield to them peace of mind in faith in God, or as Paul puts it, Jesus “*will deliver up the Kingdom of God the Father.*” Remember, the concept of “entering the Kingdom of God” is a metaphor for having peace of mind in faith in God. This faith is the belief that God is ***all*** that is real and true ***in all*** people – that all humanity is the perfect image and likeness of God in our true identity. This final peace of mind cannot come to any man until that man realizes and believes that nothing matters except God’s definition of humanity, or as Paul puts it, Christ “*must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.*” At that point, the man realizes that Jesus preached and manifested nothing new but only the truth that was established by God from the beginning. The man discerns the harmony between the ministry of Jesus Christ and God’s original work of Creation, or as Paul puts it, “*when all things have been subjected to him [i.e. Jesus], then the Son will also himself be subjected to him [i.e. God] who subjected all things to him [i.e. Jesus], that God may be all in all.*”

Remember our discussion in the section titled “The Original Covenant,” in which I wrote that the covenant truth – Genesis 1:26-27 – is the organizing principle of existence by God’s own design. This organizing principle, though it may seem to be overcome in the short-term, will be vindicated and victorious in the long-term. Paul’s point here and the fundamental meaning of the eschatological descriptions in the Bible are that the covenant truth will ultimately be vindicated and victorious forever in the minds of those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

The Book of Revelation expands upon the implications of this Christian eschatology with a very dynamic and imagery-filled description. First, much of the Book of Revelation describes how the path to this eternal victory and vindication of the covenant truth will be long and difficult. Christian believers will suffer great hardships while evil, and those who follow evil by disbelieving Jesus' teachings, will prosper.^{cxcv} In other words, Christian believers will be severely tempted to lose faith and despair – tempted to not have peace of mind in their faith. In the end though, Yahweh and Jesus Christ will be victorious over evil and the followers of evil. People who remain steadfast in Christian faith will ultimately have that peace of mind because they believe themselves to be the perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity, but those who do not have Christian faith will have only the torment of condemnation because they disbelieve that true identity. These are all matters of spirit and perception, but this is not to say that God and Jesus will not have physical, sensory victory over evil in the world. Again, we are only examining figurative, doctrinal meaning here.

Chapters 21 and 22 in the Book of Revelation describe the great honor, glory, joy, and peace-of-mind that awaits the Christian believer in an eternity of unity with God. Indeed, the theme of eternal life for the Christian believer is unity with God and all its wonderful implications. Note the heavy, repeated emphasis upon this unity in Revelation 21:3: "*I heard a loud voice out of heaven saying, ‘Behold, God’s dwelling is with people; and he will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.’*" The Christian faithful are the inhabitants of a New Jerusalem that has massive proportions of height, length, and width. It is a city so fabulously wealthy that the very foundations of its walls are adorned with precious gemstones. "[...] *The city was pure gold, like pure glass.*"^{cxcvi} The street is made of gold, and the gates are pearls. Yet, the gates never need to be closed because there is no night there. In the ancient Near East, nighttime was traditionally perceived as a time of great danger and vulnerability, so city gates would likely be closed at night. However, in the New Jerusalem, God dwells with His people, Who have faith in Him, so neither the city nor the inhabitants are vulnerable to any danger. Thus, there is no night there, and the city gates never need to be closed. This is God's own city, so it and its inhabitants are the epitome of strength, honor, and glory. All of this imagery is meant to convey the impression that the inhabitants of the city – the Christian faithful who are in unity with God – will be perfectly strong and thus perfectly honorable. Furthermore, God dwells with them, so they are not just perfectly strong and honorable but also perfectly righteous, for God cannot dwell with people unless they are as He knows they ought to be – His perfect image and likeness in their true identity. Their choice to dwell with God implies that they believe that to be their true identity. Thus, they are righteous both in true identity and spirit.

The Christian faithful will have eternal, perfect honor in this unity with God. Indeed, the Christian faithful will have a spirit of belief that they are permanently part of the unity that is God's collective because they are the permanent and perfect image and likeness of God in their true identity. Being part of God's collective, they eternally share in God's perfect strength, honor, and glory. "*The city*

has no need for the sun or moon to shine, for the very glory of God illuminated it and its lamp is the Lamb.^{"cxcvii} Light is a symbol of honor^{cxcviii}, so the meaning here is that the Christian faithful are honorable because they share in God's glory as God's perfect image and likeness in their true identity. That true identity of humanity is manifested by "the Lamb," Who is Jesus Christ. Furthermore, God dwells with His people and "*He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; neither will there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more.*"^{"cxcix} The meaning here is the absence of cause for dishonor and thus for sorrow.

This New Jerusalem and its inhabitants are also described as Jesus' bride, "*having the glory of God.*"^{"cc} This description alludes to Near Eastern marriage customs, in which the groom pays a bride price to the bride's family. The groom typically gets the funds for this price from his father, and the bride's father typically uses some or all of the price for the provisioning and adornment of the bride. In this description, the Christian faithful are magnificently adorned as Jesus' bride, as shown by the glorious description of the New Jerusalem in which they dwell. Thus, it is implied that an extremely high bride price was paid for the Christian faithful, and all of it was used for their adornment. It is easy for us Westerners to get lost in all of this imagery, but the overall meaning here is simply the extreme honor, glory, joy, and peace of mind that the Christian faithful enjoy by virtue of their true identity in God and their belief in that true identity. Furthermore, we know and believe our true identity in God through our faith in Jesus Christ. In keeping with the marriage metaphor, we are brought into unity with God through unity with Jesus Christ. Or, as the Apostle Paul put it, God is "all in all" for the Christian believer.

For the man who does not have Christian faith, he faces eternal condemnation, which the Book of Revelation describes as being "*cast into the lake of fire.*"^{"cci} Fire here symbolizes "mental suffering, anguish, and regret."^{"ccii} The man who does not have Christian faith does not believe that his true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God, so he can only define himself by his record of deeds and his circumstances in life, both of which are imperfect. This man reckons to himself unrighteousness, sin, and dishonor, so he has not eternal happiness but misery. Indeed, the theme of eternal condemnation for the unbeliever is separation from God. Note the imagery describing this separation from God for those who believe sin to be part of their true identity:

Revelation 21:27: *There will in no way enter into [the New Jerusalem] anything profane, or one who causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

Revelation 22:14-15: *Blessed are those who do his commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter in by the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, the sorcerers, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.*

Ultimately, we cannot be sure which, if any, of the events described in the eschatological passages of the Bible will literally occur. The reason I focus upon the figurative meaning of the eschatological descriptions in the Bible is that even if none of them literally occur as described, the very real and literal doctrinal truth is still contained in the figurative language. Namely, the covenant truth of Genesis 1:26-27 will ultimately be vindicated and victorious forever in the minds of those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

Judgment

To be perfectly clear, the determination of whether a given person experiences eternal life with God or eternal condemnation is entirely the choice of that given person. God invites all humanity to eternal, perfect unity with Him because all humanity has the true identity that is God's perfect image and likeness, in which there is no sin. However, each person has to accept or reject that invitation, and this is by no means easy. After all, it will certainly take great boldness to accept unity with God even though you know all the sins you have committed, and you know that God knows about those sins as well. This boldness comes only from having Christian faith, in which you confidently believe that your true identity is the perfect image and likeness of God and that God forgives all your sins because of your true identity.

This is why Christian faith is necessary for salvation unto eternal life and why the lack of Christian faith yields condemnation. Your faith is of paramount importance precisely because it is your choice that determines which will be your eternal outcome. People may object, what about God's judgment? Of course, God's judgment is relevant, but God's judgment of you was fixed permanently in Genesis 1:26-27, in which God judged you to be His perfect image and likeness. To illustrate, consider Revelation 20:11-15, in which we read of the resurrection of the dead and the judgment of all humanity:

I saw a great white throne and him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. There was found no place for them. I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and they opened books. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works. The sea gave up the dead who were in it. Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them. They were judged, each one according to his works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. If anyone was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire.

The temptation is to read that passage as a validation of the concept of righteousness by deeds, but what is it really saying? The dead are judged “according to their works.” God’s judgment of your works is that your righteous deeds are expressions of your true identity, and your sins are only expressions of you being deceived about your true identity. No matter the total number of your righteous deeds compared to your sins, God knows that your true identity is still His perfect image and likeness. The real question – the real variable in determining your salvation or condemnation – is whether you agree with God’s judgment of your deeds and your true identity. Do you agree that your true identity is God’s perfect image and likeness, in which there is no sin? Do you agree that only your righteous deeds, not your sins, express and reflect your true identity?

Notice that the description about the book of life is “*if anyone was not found written in the book of life [...]”^{cciii}* I like this description of the book of life best, among the others in the Bible, because it includes the word “found.” In other words, do you have the boldness of Christian faith to expect that your name – your true identity – is written in the book of life and the boldness to look for it in there?

It is also important to understand that those portrayed as being condemned are those who continue to disbelieve the truth even as God definitively upholds and vindicates the truth and its believers. The condemned are not those who disbelieved but then repent upon witnessing that vindication. We know that to be the case because no such repentance is mentioned in the passage. Just as in the Numbers 15 story [see the section titled “Repentance and Atonement”], no repentance is mentioned in the description of the condemned, who are cast into the lake of fire, because no such repentance is made. In other words, those who are condemned are those who confidently, obstinately disbelieve the covenant truth. They reckon their sins to be part of their true identity and, thus, do not consider themselves to be God’s perfect image and likeness in their true identity. They reject eternal life with God because they do not consider it to be appropriate for themselves nor themselves to be qualified for it.

You may rightly ask why the author of the Book of Revelation did not write the passage in such a way that specifies the outcome of eternal life or condemnation to be the product of only each person’s belief. As we discussed in the respectively titled sections, Near Easterners have a strong concept of externalization of personal perception, and they also believe in divine fatalism. If you judge your sins to not be part of your true identity but rather simply the product of your being deceived, then you are confident that God forgives your sins. As a Near Easterner with a Near Eastern psychology and philosophy, you would conceptualize that belief with the externalized imagery of your standing before God, Who knows every sin you committed but nevertheless does not change His judgment of you that you are His perfect image and likeness. Furthermore, because God forgives you and is in control of all things, you are confident that He wrote your name in the book of life.

On the other hand, if you judge your sins as defining your true identity and so consider yourself unsuitable for unity with God, then you would conceive of that belief with the externalized imagery of God casting you into the lake of fire because He judges your sins as determining and expressing your true identity. Additionally, you believe that your name is not in the book of life because you believe that you are unsuitable for eternal life with God, but, by the Near Eastern logic of divine fatalism, you would conceptualize that belief as God removing your name from the book or never entering it in the first place.

Despite the Near Eastern character of this description, its imagery still conveys a valuable lesson for all people. Indeed, all people, from all cultures, are tempted to judge themselves and others by their deeds. Such judgment is very dangerous because it can lead you to judge yourself to be unlike God in your true identity because of your sinful behavior. Thus, avoiding sinful behavior as much as possible helps to mitigate the danger of judging yourself to be sinful by nature. However, that danger can only be totally avoided by having strong Christian faith, by which you can be assured of your permanent true identity that is God's perfect image and likeness, in which there is no sin.

All cultural context aside, ultimately, the justification for my reasoning on this subject of God's judgment and our eternal life comes from the context of the whole Bible and is described in the rest of this book. Put simply, the facts that God stays loyal to His people, despite their great sinfulness, and that Jesus preached validation and forgiveness cannot be reconciled with the notion that eternal life with God is based upon one's record of deeds in life having been more righteous than sinful. This combination of concepts is totally inconsistent. The perfect love that God has for humanity during this life cannot be any greater or lesser than the perfect love that God has for humanity in the next life because God does not change.^{cclv}

What will Heaven be Like?

What will be the sensory experience of being in eternal life? As much as we Westerners may long to have this question answered, the Bible really does not provide such an answer. The reason for this omission is that the Biblical characters and writers were almost entirely comprised of Near Easterners, and the primary concern of eternity for the Near Eastern man is not such sensory details. The Apostle Paul, who was a Near Easterner, faced questions like these, and he wrote of the futility of asking them.

1 Corinthians 15:35-44: *But someone will say, “How are the dead raised?” and, “With what kind of body do they come?” You foolish one, that which you yourself sow is not made alive unless it dies. That which you sow, you don’t sow the body that will be, but a bare*

grain, maybe of wheat, or of some other kind. But God gives it a body even as it pleased him, and to each seed a body of its own. All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, another flesh of animals, another of fish, and another of birds. There are also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial differs from that of the terrestrial. There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory.

So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown perishable; it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body and there is also a spiritual body.

For Paul, as a Near Eastern man, these questions of details were foolish because they were not the important concern of eternal life. For Paul, the importance of eternal life was a man's spirit or perspective that he is strong, honorable, and righteous.

Specifically, the Near Eastern man wants to be forever honored or, put another way, forever remembered with honor. For the Near Eastern man, eternal honor is eternal life. In fact, the covenant promises from Yahweh to Abraham were symbolically promises of such eternal life. God promised Abraham a large progeny and a large piece of land to support that progeny.^{ccv} However, the benefit to a Near Eastern man of having numerous descendants for many generations even after he is dead is that he – the patriarch of that lineage – will be forever remembered with honor by his descendants, who will manifest his characteristics in this long-enduring and honorable collective identity, the ideal model of which is the patriarch. Furthermore, the legacy that he leaves behind will be a long-enduring collective of honor due to its strength in numbers and in the size and abundance of the land that its members will inhabit. Because it is Yahweh Who will give this progeny to Abraham and the Promised Land to that progeny to sustain it, Yahweh's promises to Abraham were promises of eternal life in, with, and from Yahweh. Abraham would live eternally in the memory and collective identity of his descendants, and Yahweh would provide and preserve that progeny.

Jesus as well, as a Near Eastern man, focused upon the honor of eternal life rather than the "mundane" sensory details of that experience. In Matthew 24:29-31, Jesus says,

But immediately after the suffering of those days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. Then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. He will send out his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together his chosen ones from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

In other words, Jesus writes about the vindication and victory of Himself, His teachings, and all those who have faith in Him. Vindication and victory are signs of great honor, which are metaphorically described here as “*the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky*” and “*they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.*”^{ccvi} This honor that Jesus and His followers will have will come after a period of great hardship and dishonor, which is metaphorically described as various forms of the absence of light because light is a symbol of honor.^{ccvii} Of course, because Jesus is the Messiah of God, Who preached and manifested the truth from God, the victory of Jesus is the victory of God as well.

This is not to say that there is no sensory experience of eternal life with God or that we will not spend our time doing things in Heaven. Certainly, the fact that the dead will be resurrected does imply sensory experience. Of course, as we have discussed, virtually any eschatological description in the Bible can be interpreted as being only figurative language. However, God’s love for us and desire to be loved by us does imply that He desires for us to have eternal consciousness. Again, the Bible does not address the sensory experience of eternal life simply because such details were not the primary concern of the Biblical Israelite.

Indeed, the implication of the Biblical descriptions of eschatology is more what we Westerners would call “dying in peace.” Your purpose and goal in this life is to develop sincere Christian faith, such that you sincerely believe your true identity to be the perfect image and likeness of God – a belief that you are permanently part of the unity that is God’s collective. With such belief, you can “die in peace” knowing that your honor in the sight of God and God’s love for you are perfectly secure and eternal. With that confidence, you will have the boldness to stand before God and accept eternal life with Him [see the section titled “Judgment”]. This is why it states in Hebrews 9:27, “*it is appointed for men to die once, and after this, judgment.*” That statement can seem unreasonably harsh in that it seems to preclude repentance after bodily death, but the meaning is simply that since you only physically die once, you only get one chance to die in peace with the confidence of Christian faith. This life is the time to develop a righteous perspective of yourself, as being the perfect image and likeness of God in your true identity, so that you can go to the judgment and make the right choice. In other words, the man who spends his life without Christian faith and thus believes himself to be sinful, dishonorable, and unlike God in his true identity, even to the moment of death, is extremely unlikely to repent subsequent to that death and have the boldness to accept eternal life with God.

However, for the man of Christian faith, his eternal life starts even before bodily death because he knows his true identity to permanently be the perfect image and likeness of God, in which there is no sin. This man knows himself to be perfectly honorable in the sight of God and perfectly loved by God. For this man, the victory and vindication of the covenant truth is not just an expectation for the future but also a current and eternal reality.

Conclusion

In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus said “*Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*”

Jesus brought to us a reminder of the glorious, joyful truth, established by God from the very beginning, that the true identity of every human being is already and permanently the perfect image and likeness of God. It is a true identity and perfect righteousness that we need not earn nor achieve but merely believe. We need not “make ourselves” good enough for God because God made us permanently perfect in our true identity by His own Creative work. That is why Jesus’ yoke is easy; that is why Jesus’ burden is light. In Jesus we know that the road to God’s Kingdom – peace of mind in faith in God – is not a lifelong guilt-trip in which we beg God’s forgiveness of our sins, for our sins are not part of our true identity. Quite to the contrary, the road to God’s Kingdom is no road at all, for every one of us is always at the Kingdom’s gate, and we need only to enter through the boldness of faith in Jesus Christ.

After the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, God “placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.”^{ccviii} We are tempted to interpret the cherubim and the flaming sword as meant to keep us out, but the truth is that the cherubim guard the existence of the way back to eternal life with God so that it cannot be overcome by evil. The flaming sword, too, guards the way to eternal life but it is also a torch – a beacon – to guide us back home from the darkness of Satan’s lies. The truth found in Christian faith is that beacon and that way back. As Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.*”^{ccix}

Amen.

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- i <<https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/legalcode>>.
- ii However, this book is certainly not the first or only book that explains Christian doctrine in relation to Near Eastern culture. I am indebted to the works of authors such as George Lamsa, Rocco Errico, and Abraham Rihbany, all of whom are much more knowledgeable than me on Near Eastern culture and have written their own excellent books on its relation to the Bible and Christian doctrine.
- iii For the purposes of this book, I define “contemporary” Near Eastern culture to be that of the years 1800 through modern-day. Admittedly, though, post-World War II, there were some dramatic and relatively rapid changes to some aspects of daily life in the Near East. However, Near Eastern rhetoric, philosophy, and psychology has, even today, remained largely unchanged from Biblical times. Furthermore, God has blessed me to learn about Near Eastern culture through reading the works of other learned people who have made a direct study of that culture. Thus, while I benefit greatly from the anthropological work of others, I would never consider myself an *expert* on Near Eastern culture.
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- liii Emphasis is mine.
- liv Bible Hub. Strong's Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/430.htm>>.
- lv Young's Literal Translation.
- lvii Genesis 2:18.
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- lix Bible Hub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8104.htm>>.
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- lxvii Patai, Raphael. Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East. Copyright 1959. p.20-21.
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- lxix Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/1343.htm>>.
- lxx Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/266.htm>>.
- lxxi The concept of honor in Near Eastern culture has been written about by many authors in many works, such that naming one would do injustice to the totality of the subject. If you would like to learn more about this concept, I recommend consulting the books listed in the bibliography of this book.
- lxxii Genesis 15.
- lxxiii In particular, Tore Nordenstam writes extensively on these distinctions. Nordenstam, Tore. Sudanese Ethics. Copyright 1968.
- lxxiv Shoubey, E. "The Influence of the Arabic Language on the Psychology of the Arabs." The Middle East Journal. Summer 1951: Vol 5 Iss 3. p.295ff.
- lxxv Patai, Raphael. The Arab Mind. Revised Ed. Copyright 1983. p.63-69, 172-176.
- lxxvi Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.198-201.
- lxxvii Berger, Morroe. The Arab World Today. Copyright 1962. p.179-180.
- lxxviii James 1:13.
- lxxix Bible Hub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance and Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6175.htm>>.
- lxxx The wording of the World English Bible translation of Genesis 2:9 can be a bit confusing. It states, "Out of the ground Yahweh God made every tree to grow that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food, including the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." One could interpret that phrasing to mean that the Tree of Life was in the middle of the garden while the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was elsewhere in the garden. Given that God identifies the forbidden tree in Genesis 2:17 as specifically being the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and that Adam and Eve committed sin by eating fruit from a tree in the middle of the garden, the only logical conclusion is that they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and thus that it must have been in the middle of the garden as well as the Tree of Life.
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 lxxxiii Proverbs 3:11-12.
 lxxxiv Matthew 24:35.
 lxxxv Bible Hub. Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/4480.htm>>.
 lxxxvi Pealim. "Hebrew Prepositions." <<https://www.pealim.com/dict/4958-ke/>>.
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 lxxxviii James 1:14-15 refers to this tactic that Satan uses to tempt us to sin.
 lxxxix Leviticus – Chapters 12 and 15.
 xc Leviticus – Chapters 13-14.
 xci John 9:1-2.
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 xciii Leviticus 15:19-24.
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 c Emphasis is mine.
 ci Hamady, Sania. Temperament and Character of the Arabs. Copyright 1960. p.184-193.
 cii Exodus 9:12; 10:1; 10:20; 10:27; 11:10; 14:8.
 ciii Exodus 8:15; 8:32; 9:34.
 civ Genesis 6:5-8.
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 cxiv Exodus 20:7.
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 cxx Luke 10:25-37.
 cxxi Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle Society." Honour and Shame : The Values of Mediterranean Society. Ed. J.G. Peristiany. Copyright 1965.
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- cxxxii Granqvist, Hilma. Child Problems among the Arabs: Studies in a Muhammadan Village in Palestine. Copyright 1950. p.245. Note that Granqvist does not use the exact phrase “best of the best,” but I believe it to be an appropriate description of her explanation of the meaning of salt in this context.
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- cxxxv Matthew 23:4.
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- clxiii John 3:1-21.
- clxiv Daniel 7:1-7.
- clxv Luke 7:50 – emphasis is mine.
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- clxviii Matthew 28:19 – emphasis in mine.
- clxix Romans 9-11.
- clxx Romans 8:38-39.
- clxxi Matthew 3:13-15.
- clxxii The Biblical references to Jesus’ miracles are well-known and too numerous to list, but these passages indicate that Jesus’ disciples worked miracles as well: Matthew 10:1; Mark 6:7; Luke 9:1,6; and Luke 10:9,17.
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clxxvi Bible Hub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance and Thayer's Greek Lexicon.

<<https://biblehub.com/greek/4043.htm>>. NOTE: Both Strong's and Thayer's define the word as referring to behavior, but I would argue that where the word is used figuratively in the Bible, the reference to behavior is only secondary and indirect whereas the primary, direct emphasis is upon the spirit which governs the behavior. Additionally, to interpret the meaning of Romans 8:1 to be that freedom from condemnation comes through abstaining from sinful behavior would render pointless Paul's preceding argument, in Romans 7:15-25, that if you have a spirit which believes the goodness of God's commands, then the sins you commit are not actually committed by you but by the sin which dwells in you. There would be no point in Paul making a distinction between your sins and your true self to only then proclaim that salvation comes through righteous behavior.

clxxvii Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3.

clxxviii John 4:20-21,23-24.

clxxix Matthew 28:19-20.

clxxx Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/3100.htm>>.

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clxxxii Kraemer, David. "Food, Eating, and Meals." The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine. Catherine Hezser. Editor. Copyright 2010. p.405.

clxxxiii Bible Hub. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/2917.htm>>.

clxxxiv James 4:2.

clxxxv Matthew 6:7-8.

clxxxvi Matthew 6:9-13.

clxxxvii Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/5613.htm>>.

clxxxviii Luke 11:4.

clxxxix Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/2532.htm>>.

cxc Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/1063.htm>>.

cxci Matthew 7:1-2.

cxcii Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon. <<https://biblehub.com/greek/281.htm>>.

cxciii Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus. Entry for "Eschatology."

<<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/eschatology>>.

cxciv Bible Hub. Thayer's Greek Lexicon and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.

<<https://biblehub.com/greek/2673.htm>>.

cxcv Descriptions of these hardships are in most of the Book of Revelation, one example being Chapter 13.

cxcvi Revelation 21:18.

cxcvii Revelation 21:23.

cxcviii Granqvist, Hilma. Child Problems among the Arabs: Studies in a Muhammadan Village in Palestine.

Copyright 1950. p.134,137,244ff.,324. Granqvist directly indicates that light is a symbol of life, but the examples she gives of the symbol's usage refer to *enduring life*. For life to endure, it requires strength, and in the Near East, strength is the fundamental characteristic of honor. Thus, I would argue that the greater symbolism of light is honor. Furthermore, being "the light of the world" would imply great, even supreme honor, as compared to the rest of the people in the world.

cxcix Revelation 21:4.

cc Revelation 21:11.

cci Revelation 20:15.

ccii Errico, Rocco A and George M. Lamsa. Aramaic Light on the Gospel of Matthew. Copyright 2000. p.77. Mr. Errico identifies the nature of spiritual suffering in the Biblical concept of Hell and its frequent association with fire.

cciii Emphasis is mine.

cciv Malachi 3:6.

ccv Genesis 15.

ccvi Errico, Rocco A. and George M. Lamsa. Aramaic Light on the Gospel of Matthew. Copyright 2000. p.302.

ccvii Granqvist, Hilma. Child Problems among the Arabs: Studies in a Muhammadan Village in Palestine. Copyright 1950. p.134,137,244ff.,324. Granqvist directly indicates that light is a symbol of life, but the examples she gives of the symbol's usage refer to *enduring life*. For life to endure, it requires strength, and in the Near East, strength is the fundamental characteristic of honor. Thus, I would argue that the greater symbolism of light is honor. Furthermore, being "the light of the world" would imply great, even supreme honor, as compared to the rest of the people in the world.

ccviii Genesis 3:24.

ccix John 14:6.